MERE ORTHODOXY

EST. MMV

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T.S. ELIOT

I confess, however, that I am not myself very much concerned with the question of influence, or with those publicists who have impressed their names upon the public by catching the morning tide and rowing very fast in the direction in which the current was flowing; but rather that there should always be a few writers preoccupied in penetrating to the core of the matter, in trying to arrive at the truth and to set it forth, without too much hope, without ambition to alter the immediate course of affairs, and without being downcast or defeated when nothing appears to ensue.

MAGAZINES AND MOVEMENTS

It is a sad fact that writers are often the very last people to understand their own business. Consider the recent death of the American newspaper as an example. At their peak in the 80s and 90s, American print media was a behemoth. I recall once reading an essay by an old feature reporter who got their start at a large weekly in the 80s. They remembered being taken aside by an editor who was concerned that they weren't using all the money in their expense account. "The money is there. Why aren't you spending it?" Though hard to believe now, that was the reality of American print media for many publications not that long ago.

The trouble is those newspapermen and women didn't know their business. They thought their product was news. But in revenue terms it mostly wasn't; the product was what you might call "information distribution infrastructure." Before the internet, information distribution was expensive. It required large printing presses, staff to run and maintain those presses, a fleet of delivery vehicles, drivers for the vehicles, and the now forgotten paper boys and girls who rode their bikes from house to house delivering the day's news. Because most businesses or private individuals who wanted to broadcast some kind of message did not possess all of that infrastructure, they were forced to work with companies that did possess it. And this gave newspapers and magazines a *de facto* monopoly on information distribution. It also meant that when the internet came along, services like Craigslist and later Google Ads and Facebook Marketplace were primed to pull the rug out from under them. And while there is more to the story of the death of the newspaper than this, it is certainly the case that this simple confusion about the newspaper's actual value is in large part responsible for their collapse.

So what of magazines today, particularly magazines like the one you're reading now, a thing dedicated to ideas, books, and reflection? What is our "product"? To answer that question, we need to understand something more basic. A friend of mine said this back when he was launching a new magazine: "Every new magazine should be an intimation of a possible future, a glimpse of how the world might be." Magazines like this one, in other words, imagine other possible futures than the ones that seem most obvious and even inevitable to us today. They contain within themselves worlds of quite literal possibilities. They represent, in some sense, dispatches from a possible future that is not certain but remains within our grasp.

But worlds are not peopled by disembodied heads on sticks, nor are they peopled, really, by "customers." They are peopled, rather, by citizens of that world, lovers of that way of life, people keen to exemplify that world's life and values themselves and to commend it to others.

The product of this magazine, in other words, is the offering of membership in a community of learners attempting to imagine and build another world together.

That brings me to the purpose of this letter. Online media has found itself in a very strange place, not unpredictably given the death of our immediate predecessor, the newspaper industry. We now know there is a business model that works for extremely large scale endeavors: online subscriptions. The *New York Times* is awash in cash thanks to online subscription revenue and *The Atlantic* recently reached profitability for the first time in some time for similar reasons. If you have a large endeavor that reaches a certain scale with subscriptions, you'll do well. Likewise, we have a model that works well for small one-or two-person operations: It's still subscriptions, but subscriptions at a smaller volume. If the *Times* needs nearly 10 million digital subscribers to thrive, smaller lone producer operations can often get by on several thousand—if you get 3,000 people subscribed at $5 a month, you'll find yourself in the top 10% of American earners. Even 1,500 subscribers can afford a comfortably middle class life for a small endeavor.

Idea magazines, however, sit in the uncomfortable middle between those two models. On the one hand, because we publish a larger number of authors and because we offer products other than an email newsletter, our costs are higher. On the other hand, because we are still a relatively small venture, it is quite difficult to reach the kind of scale that allows the *Times* or *Atlantic* to be successful. So the subscription-based model doesn't really work.

But also I've come to think that the subscription model, revenue considerations aside, isn't really the best model for magazines like this one anyway. There are several reasons. First, there really is something lost when information is put behind a paywall online. Certainly I understand the reasons that paywalls exist and I very much support writers being able to make a living wage for their labor. But I remain haunted by Tim Carmody's concept of "unlocking the commons." Briefly, internet technology makes the cost of distributing information virtually free. The cost is wrapped up in production, but the distribution itself—unlike the newspaper era—is extremely cheap. So producers can recoup their costs in one of two ways: They charge a subscription fee to anyone who wants to access their work and they close it to everyone else. Or they ask their supporters to effectively become members of the work with them, supporting the work through their giving, but explicitly not regarding their gift as a cost they pay to access a product that they wouldn't otherwise be able to enjoy.

As Carmody says,

> "Fans support the person and the work. But it's not a transaction, a fee for service. It's a contribution

that benefits everyone. Free-riders aren't just welcome; free-riding is the point.

This, I think, is key to understanding the psychology of patronage. Normally, if you buy a product — let's say you're buying a book. Books aren't perfect commodities, but they're still commodities. As a shopper, you're trying to get as much value for your book as you can for your money. If I can get the book cheaper and faster from retailer (Amazon) than retailer (Barnes & Noble), most of the time, that's what I'm going to do.

If I'm skeptical of A, and prefer to support B or (City bookstore of my choice), I'm not strictly speaking in a purchasing relationship any more, but something closer to a patronage one. I don't just want my money to buy an object; I want it to support institutions and individuals I like, and I want it to support the common good."

So in the spirit of unlocking the commons, we are announcing our membership program today. Here, in short, is how it will work:

• First, everything on Mere Orthodoxy will continue to be free to read online.

• Second, everything older than one week at Mere Orthodoxy (with a small number of exceptions) will be "gated" as with a paywall with one important difference: We aren't going to ask you for money in order to read our past work. We are simply going to ask you to share your email address with us.

• Third, anyone who does sign up for a membership, either paid monthly at $5/month or annually at $60/year, will automatically have access to all the archives as well as receiving other unique benefits. At present, those benefits include a copy of our print edition and access to our members Discord server, The Society of St Anne's. In the near future, we plan to also offer a members-only monthly email which will be a Reader Email Bag with one of our editors where members can submit questions to our writers, and we also hope to offer members-only online events in which we have more in-depth conversations with authors and offer readers the chance to ask their questions live. Those sessions will also be recorded and made available to members who couldn't attend.

Why are we structuring our work in this new way? We are seeing glimmers of renewal in the American and western church more generally. There are pockets of unlooked for revival, a new attentiveness to catechesis, and a renewed desire to plumb the depths of the church's theological and spiritual

traditions. The work we are attempting at Mere O is to make real a possible future in which it is simply normal for American churches to be:

- marked by habits of careful thought
- generous of spirit
- deeply interested in God's world and the people who live in it
- dedicated to an untroubled seeking after wisdom as disclosed to us by God
- always pervaded by a quietly confident and deeply rooted Christian conviction

In order to accomplish that, we are creating media for a community of learners passionate about precisely this kind of Christian renewal. To fulfill that mission, we need to do two things:

First, we need to reach a large audience, and that means we need our own commons, as it were, to be unlocked. That's why everything we publish, including print edition essays and reviews, will be completely ungated for the first week after publication and free in exchange for an email address after that first week.

Why email? We think the social media age is ending. Already Twitter is often only our fourth highest traffic source—and Facebook is usually at about the same level or slightly less. Our top traffic sources tend to be direct traffic, in itself an excellent sign, as well as referral traffic from other websites and organic search traffic. But even if we were more dependent on social media, we'd be seeking ways to extricate ourselves from that because we've come to be highly suspicious of the intellectual and moral habits encouraged by smartphones and social media. So we aren't building for social media, that's for sure.

But also we desire to not build for algorithms at all, which means relying less on both social media and search and relying more on an engaged audience of people who have effectively raised their hand and said they enjoy our work enough to give us their email address so they can continue to engage with it.

Second, we need a band of friends who are committed to this possible future with us. We hope you will be part of that.

What does that mean? Most of all, we need your prayer that we would succeed in this work. There are many challenges, temptations, and obstacles to maintaining a responsible, reflective, and intelligent media presence, particularly in a more tempestuous time such as our own.

But, secondarily, we need your financial support so that we have the tools and resources we need to succeed. And we need your support not because you want exclusive access to a product, but because you want everyone to be able to access the thoughts, arguments, and reviews we publish. Christians of all people should know, after all, that God works through words, including the written word. If you care about the availability of beautiful, clear Christian words to the masses and if you desire that more people would be able to encounter a considered Christian intelligence seeking to radiate the love of God into the world, then we have a question for you: Would you join us in this work?

Thank you for reading and for your support of us in this important work.

Under the Mercy,

JAKE MEADOR

JAKE MEADOR IS THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF MERE ORTHODOXY. HE LIVES IN HIS HOMETOWN OF LINCOLN, NE WITH HIS WIFE AND FOUR CHILDREN.

Despair

E.J. HUTCHINSON

> *"Disorder in the house*
> *All bets are off*
> *I'm sprawled across the davenport of despair"*
> *—Warren Zevon, "Disorder in the House"*

In the midst of his discussion of astrology in *The Elizabethan World Picture*, E.M.W. Tillyard comments in passing on the phenomenon of modern despair. He writes:

> With the superstitious terrors [of astrology] I am not concerned: they have little specifically to do with the Elizabethan age. But it is worth reflecting (as is not always done) that even these were not all horror and loss. If mankind had to choose between a universe that ignored him and one that noticed him to do him harm, it might well choose the second. Our own age need not begin congratulating itself on its freedom from superstition till it defeats a more dangerous temptation to despair.[1]

In this telling, the modern world has shaken off the shackles of irrationalism (one wonders if Tillyard would revise his judgment were he still with us), but in exchange it has reaped a harvest of hopelessness. Tillyard suggests that even a hostile universe might be more comforting than an apathetic one.

He is probably right. For the opposite of love is not hatred but indifference, and so an indifferent universe gives rise to greater existential terror than any other kind. In Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, the hero maintains a sort of nobility, albeit a tragic one: head held high against the divine powers that torment him, he goes to his doom. Contrast the world of the stories of H.P. Lovecraft as described by Donald R. Burleson:

[1] E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943), 49.

The horror, ultimately, in a Lovecraft tale is not some gelatinous lurker in dark places, but rather the realization, by the characters involved, of their helplessness and their insignificance in the scheme of things—their terribly ironic predicament of being sufficiently well-developed organisms to perceive and feel the poignancy of their own motelike unimportance in a blind and chaotic universe which neither loves them nor even finds them worthy of notice, let alone hatred or hostility.[2]

Contrast, too, the world of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. Unpeopled of divinities, it is a world in which Aaron says to Demetrius, "Pray to the devils; the gods have given us over." It is a dark world, a prison of sorrow, in which even evil and vice lose their vibrancy because they lack contrast with anything better. It is a world of fog, in which one continually stumbles for lack of vision. It is hell.

But now we have a problem. For Shakespeare created the world conjured in *Titus Andronicus* in the sixteenth century, the precise period that Tillyard indicates was less given to despondency than his mid-twentieth century present. In fact, "despair" was a common topic of discussion in the sixteenth century. Around the time of *Titus Andronicus*, the Danish Lutheran theologian Niels Hemmingsen devoted

an entire treatise to it called the *Antidote against the Disease of Despair* (1590). That is not all. Tillyard refers to the "temptation to despair": intriguingly, Hemmingsen treats despair under the petition of the Lord's Prayer that reads, "Lead us not into temptation."

Yet one might be forgiven for nevertheless thinking that Tillyard was onto something when he wrote of this temptation as peculiarly contemporary three quarters of a century ago. I am certainly sympathetic to that claim, and to the suggestion that the crisis has only accelerated since. According to Carol Graham, 70,000 Americans on average died from deaths of despair every year from 2005 to 2019. The United States Congress Joint Economic Committee gathered data in 2019 showing such deaths to be occurring at the highest rate on record in the U.S. In 2021, *STAT* reported on the alarming rise in the rate of such deaths, an increase that ranges from 56% to 387%.[3]

To see whether the despair of the sixteenth century differs from today's despair—and, if so, how—we need to look more closely. We need a thicker account of what it means to be without hope in the world.

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Traditionally, despair was often discussed in relation to the theory of the four humors (blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm), whose balance or imbalance

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[2] Donald R. Burleson, H.P. Lovecraft: A Critical Study (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 12.

[3] See Carol Graham, "America's crisis of despair: A federal task force for economic recovery and societal well-being" (February 10, 2021), accessed March 28, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/americas-crisis-of-despair-a-federal-task-force-for-economic-recovery-and-societal-well-being/; United States Joine Economic Committee, "Long-Term Trends in Deaths of Despair" (September 5, 2019), accessed March 28, 2024, https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2019/9/long-term-trends-in-deaths-of-despair; David Introcaso, "Deaths of despair: the unrecognized tragedy of working class immiseration" (December 29, 2021), accessed March 28, 2024, https://www.statnews.com/2021/12/29/deaths-of-despair-unrecognized-tragedy-working-class-immiseration/.

was thought to illuminate, and even to account for, various personality-types. If one had an excess of black bile, he would be melancholic, and thus given to despair. Shakespeare's Hamlet, for example, was such a person, as is clear from the first appearance of the eponymous protagonist in Act 1, Scene 2 of the play; so, it would appear, was Ophelia. Her case was fatal.

But the best and most enduring accounts of despair from this period are theological, as I suspect Shakespeare, and the Wittenberg-educated Prince of Denmark, knew.

For the theological delineation of despair is a discovery and legacy of the Wittenberg Reformation. I have already referred to the account by Hemmingsen, who, not coincidentally, was himself, like Hamlet, educated at Wittenberg--"not coincidentally" because Shakespeare's Hamlet and Copenhagen's Hemmingsen had, I suggest, a shared intellectual forerunner, Martin Luther. One can do much worse than look to Martin Luther's 1535 commentary on Galatians as one of the canonical texts of theological psychology.

In Luther's commentary, the frequent mention of theologically-charged *desperatio* is integrally connected to the distinction between the law and the gospel. This is by design: despair does not, and must not, stand alone, either as a discursive topic or as a category of experience. If it does, the result is disorder—and, in the end, death. Instead, the law, when used appropriately, gives the knowledge of sin. This knowledge, in turn, makes a person despair of his own efforts to be righteous before God, so that he can receive forgiveness and Christ's alien righteousness

through the gospel.

That is the thumbnail sketch. But now we must paint the picture. How does a theological account of despair function in Luther's dialectical account of law and gospel, and what does that have to do with Warren Zevon and America's suicide rate?

For Luther, the dialectic between law and gospel is a classic instance of an experience everyone has had at some point. Someone says to you, "I have some good news and some bad news." What do you say in response? "Give me the bad news first." That is what the law does. And the news is very, very bad. In one passage, Luther puts it as follows:

> [W]hen the law accuses and terrifies the conscience by saying, 'You should have done this or that! You didn't do it! You are therefore guilty of the wrath of God and of eternal death!'—then the law is fulfilling its proper use and end. There, the heart is ground down all the way to the point of despair. This use and office of the law is perceived by terrified and despairing consciences that seek death or desire to commit suicide on account of the trouble the conscience brings.[4]

The law, when it confronts our consciences with our guilt, our shame, our inadequacies and failures, kills. From this, Luther does not shy away. The conscience that is truly afflicted, Luther says, longs for death.

Luther's theology would indeed be a counsel of despair if he said no more than this. But, though the law tells us that we are wicked, we recall that God has

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[4] All translations from this work are my own.

no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). God does not give us the law out of sadistic delight, so that he might entice us to self-slaughter.[5] Even if "the office of the law is only to kill," it is nevertheless to kill in such a way that God is able to make alive. Therefore, the law was not given for death *simpliciter*; but, because man is proud and dreams that he is wise, that he is just and holy, he needs to be humbled by the law, so that that beast, the self-satisfied opinion about one's own righteousness, might be killed. Until it has been killed, man cannot live. Therefore, although the law kills, God nevertheless uses that effect of the law (that is, the death I have spoken of), for a good use, namely, for life.

Or, more succinctly:

> [T]he proper office of the law is to make us guilty, to humble us, to kill us, to lead us to hell and take everything from us—but with the following purpose: so that we might be justified, lifted up, made alive, carried into heaven, and might obtain everything. Therefore, it does not kill us *simpliciter*, but it kills us unto life.

What an arresting phrase: "It kills us unto life." This promise of life and peace, however, comes with a catch. We must first confess that we are worms and beggars, "arrant knaves all";[6] and that is a very unpleasant thing to do.

Isn't there some other way to be happy—one that involves less discomfort? Perhaps we could get rid of the law altogether. If we were to do that, maybe we could cut to the chase and find happiness without the embarrassment of self-abasement.

It is attractive, this possibility of being glad without all that gloom and, by denying the Decalogue, doing an end-run around despair.

If one wanted to attempt this, it would make sense to start at the top. For to rid ourselves of the law, we must rid ourselves of the God who gave the law. Thus the first step must be, and has been, to hear the commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me"—and shrug.

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We[7] have tried this. The odd thing is not that we have done so; the odd thing is that it hasn't worked. We have tried to expunge what we think of as the vengeful God of hard-edged revelation. Having done so, we are, as a people, more miserable than ever.

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[5] Cf. Hamlet's first soliloquy:

> O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
>
> Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
>
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. (Hamlet 1.2.129-32)
>
> Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,

[6] Hamlet 3.1.129.

[7] I continue saying "we," though it is obvious that I frequently mean "other people." Speaking of "other people," I hate it when writers do this. What gives? Though "we" don't all, as individuals, do what I am saying "we" do, I am convinced that what I am describing is, nevertheless, a temptation for all of us as individuals (and cf. the connection between temptation and despair noted earlier), as well as a fair characterization of our dominant cultural mode (i.e., our corporate identity) at present. I hope that that suffices to justify my manner of speaking—and if not, I beg your pardon.

Many people have noticed this strange phenomenon. Years ago, for instance, the comedian Louis C.K. said on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, "Everything is amazing right now, and nobody's happy." And what, precisely, did he think was "amazing"? Cell phones, ATMs, credit cards, air travel, in-flight internet. All the items on this list have something in common. They are all technological, all the material application of technique for the alteration of material circumstances. But it is a matter of empirical observation that such things evidently do not bring happiness. At best, they are diversions from misery. At worst, they make it worse.

So the answer to why we are miserable must lie elsewhere. I suggest that it lies in our *en masse* rejection of the first commandment. And that rejection turns on a lie at its very heart, namely, that we can dispense with the injunction to have no other gods before the true God simply by having no gods at all. Thus we avoid violation of the commandment while *also* not needing to mess about with the capital-G God mentioned there. Checkmate, God—or so we think. But, as always, God is wiser than we. He must laugh when he sees what careless readers we are.

For God tells us in the first commandment that we *must* have a God, and that it must be he. With him, there is "no shuffling," to quote Hamlet's Uncle Claudius. We can sin against the first commandment, in other words, both in excess and in defect. Having too many gods goes against God's law, to be sure—but so does having too few. Try as we might, we will never be happy so long as we refuse to admit that this is the case.

"Prove it," someone might say. But what need is there for elaborate marshaling of evidence? Just look around. Franz Kafka's narrator in *The Castle* remarks that K., the novel's central character, has the following sensation upon being left outside alone in the snow: "'Cause for a slight attack of despair,' was the thought that came to him, 'if I were only here by accident, not on purpose.'"[8] But W.H. Auden realized that such a sentiment (that is, that it would be better to be products of random chance than of design) was no solution—was, in fact, exactly backwards—when, 80 years ago, he had his own Narrator, in his Christmas oratorio *For the Time Being*, note near its inception that the perceived emptiness at the center of the cosmos—the uninterpretable accident of existence—the horrible silence that does not condescend to scold us—is the worst punishment of all:

> That is why we despair; that is why we would welcome
> The nursery bogey or the winecellar ghost,
> why even The violent howling of winter and war has become
> Like a juke-box tune that we dare not stop. We are afraid
> Of pain but more afraid of silence; for no nightmare
> Of hostile objects could be as terrible as this Void
> This is the Abomination. This is the wrath of God. [9]

"[T]his Void": it is this that causes existential despair, the hopelessness of being in a world with no intrinsic meaning or reference to anything outside itself.

[8]Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. Mark Harman (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 14.

[9] W.H. Auden, "For the Time Being," in Poems, Volume II: 1940-1973, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 172.

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"The hopelessness of being" is a phrase that accurately encapsulates the encounter many in the contemporary West have with the world, the encounter they have with themselves.[10] Perhaps it is an encounter you have had with yourself. I now switch to the second person, and I do so with purpose. Lutherans are fond of saying that "the law always accuses." In the current state of affairs, existence itself is often felt as an accusation,[11] the hammer blow of what can appear to be an iron law of inscrutable cosmic ambiguity. Thus the cosmos is now summoned on stage to shake its finger at you. Your universe is empty, and somehow you hear it speak. This is what it says: "Here you are, and now what?"

One widespread answer at the bottom of the statistics I mentioned earlier is found in the title of a 1995 song by The Smashing Pumpkins, "Here Is No Why."[12] Its opening line sets the tone: "The useless drag of another day." Billy Corgan goes on:

> And in your sad machines
> You'll forever stay
> Desperate and displeased with whoever you
> are

The world is a "machine," not a creation. You are a "machine," not a creature. And you feel trapped and imprisoned in your machine, "desperate and displeased" with yourself and others.[13]

What should you do? As one does with any machine whose performance disappoints us, you tinker with it—tune it, modify it, swap out some parts for others. There are all the old vices for this, of course—not just chemicals, but identities, for instance that ghastly modern invention, "race." Perhaps you can lose yourself in assimilation to some group larger than yourself and find your happiness there; perhaps you can even cloak your vice under the virtuous-sounding name of "solidarity."

But it is 2024, and you no longer need to limit yourself to the old vices. Medical technology has invented new ones, too. Now you can be whoever you feel you are supposed to be, you are told. The identity with which you entered the world was "assigned" to you: it was someone else's doing, and you are that person's passive victim. That is not right—it is part of the prison—and you must change it. Then you can be happy.

That is the sales pitch that our contemporary evangelists of earthly felicity make, the gospel that

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[10] One should not, however, overstate any purported uniqueness of the "contemporary West." Existential despair has a long pedigree. Consider the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius: "In all this murk and dirt, in all this flux of being, time, movement, things moved, I cannot begin to see what on earth there is to value or even to aim for" (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 5.10, trans. Martin Hammond [London: Penguin, 2006], 39).

[11] This connection between the rebuke of the law and the rebuke of existence is not an accident: see below.

[12] Even the posing of the question may indicate a disorder. Cf. a remark of E.R. Dodds in an essay on Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus*: "'What are we here for?'...is an old question....Plato in the Theaetetus affirmed that it was the proper subject of philosophical enquiry. But it is not in fact a question which happy men readily ask themselves" ("On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex," Greece & Rome 13 [1966]: 21).

[13] Again, it should be stressed that our predicament has antecedents, because it is in certain respects part and parcel of the human condition. Here is the first-century A.D. Stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger: "The sickness [of mental unrest] has countless characteristics, but only one effect, dissatisfaction with oneself" (Seneca, *On the Tranquillity of the Mind* 2, in Dialogues and Essays, trans. John Davie [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 116).

answers to the empty universe's law.

But what if these ploys don't work? What if you are just as miserable as you were before? What happens then? Every day, the news tells us what happens then, and the news is very grim news.

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It is worth pondering why our fixes don't help. If Christianity is true—if reality is given, not made—then the denial of creation will not evacuate creation of its existence and of its controlling and ordering force, however much one may wish to make it go away. There is, in other words, an echo here of what was said above about the existence of God and the despair induced by his law. Let us see why this is so.

Consider the Ten Commandments. They speak of relations: our relation to God and our relation to our neighbor. But the universality of their principles— what C.S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* calls the "Tao"—suggests that they are not arbitrary injunctions creating a new reality, but rather a reflection of the reality that already exists, one that in turn codifies the kind of human action that will lead to happiness within that order, that is, to what Aristotle identifies as "living well." More briefly, divine law is an expression of created order. Thus the aforementioned Dane— Hemmingsen, not Hamlet— thought (correctly, in my view) that he could successfully prove the truth of the Decalogue by purely natural and rational means.[14]

But if the order of creation underwrites the order of law, then violating creation will bring one to misery just as surely as violating the law does--albeit, perhaps, a bit more slowly. My epigraph from Warren Zevon was not, therefore, superfluous: disorder and despair are intrinsically connected.

And if the transcendent dimension has disappeared, our despair occurs within a totally immanent frame, with no God to save us.

Thus it should come as no surprise that living against nature, as Westerners now try to do in so many ways, brings about a seemingly invincible unhappiness across society.

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We should not miss the fact, then, that the *existential* despair driving so many deaths, so much violence and rage, such agonizing sadness in the United States and elsewhere is actually a type of *theological* despair. As Auden says, "This is the wrath of God."

Curiously, though, this bad news brings good news with it. The false guilt and shame of contemporary identitarianism are signs: signs that man in his fallen state cannot do without guilt and shame. If we reject what God says about guilt and shame, we will simply make up something else. We have done so: when someone has sinned, we can expect to see him bow and scrape in contrition before the manufactured god of public opinion. It is a cruel god, one that does not bleed on our behalf or pardon when we pray.

If despair is the sickness unto death, the reorienting of the problem within a transcendent theological frame

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[14] Niels Hemmingsen, *On the Law of Nature: A Demonstrative Method*, trans. E.J. Hutchinson (Grand Rapids, MI: CLP Academic, 2018), 91-102.

reminds us that death is not the end. We need guilt and shame, yes, but the real kind: the kind that can be confessed—and forgiven. Only the old God, the one we have killed, can do this; has done this. In sum, the cure for existential despair is the realization and confession that it is a form of theological despair, the same one that Luther acutely analyzed 500 years ago. The cure is the gospel.

This truth is beautifully stated in a poem that Philip Melanchthon wrote for Martin Luther's son a few years after his father had died. It begins thus:

> The church, despondent, choked on night's
> dank fog,
> And faith grew silent, buried by the law.
> Yet, lest the human race die in despair,
> The Lord God taught us by your father's
> voice.[15]

What did he use that voice to teach? As Melanchthon puts it in another poem about Luther (though I have taken some liberty with the rendering), "pure Christ, one hundred proof."[16] It is stated again in a twentieth century hymn by another Martin, Martin H. Franzmann. He can have the last word.

> Thou camest to our hall of death,
> O Christ, to breathe our poisoned air,
> To drink for us the dark despair
> That strangled our reluctant breath.
> How beautiful the feet that trod

The road that leads us back to God!
How beautiful the feet that ran
To bring the great good news to man![17]

E.J. HUTCHINSON IS ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF CLASSICS AT HILLSDALE COLLEGE, WHERE HE ALSO DIRECTS THE COLLEGIATE SCHOLARS PROGRAM. HE IS THE EDITOR AND TRANSLATOR OF NIELS HEMMINGSEN'S ON THE LAW OF NATURE: A DEMONSTRATIVE METHOD.

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[14] The translation is my own. The "despair" in line 3 is my addition; a more literal version would read "Yet, lest the entire human race utterly perish." But the gloss is, I trust, faithful to Luther's outlook as described above, and an extension of the previous condition of the church in line 1, which Melanchthon says had been "despondent" (maesta) due to the law's entombment of faith.

[15] Melanchthon's Latin refers to him as one "who taught Christ purely" (qui Christum docuit pure).

Beginning Again With Power:
THE PROBLEM OF BUREAUCRACY

MYLES WERNTZ

Power and its abuses have received no shortage of discussion. Unfortunately, for all the conversation, we have missed the problem almost entirely. For the last three decades within Christian circles, "empire" has been the metaphor of choice, with the Kingdom of God and the empires of Rome, Babylon, and Egypt as the counterpoints to the way of Jesus. In this discourse, "empire" serves as a top-down kind of force, an imposing and overt mechanism by which people are constrained. What it obscures is that, the vast majority of the time, humans are not organized by overt force, but by bureaucracy.

Greg Grandin, in his *End of the Myth*, writes that, after there were no more lands to conquer, American sensibilities of expansion and empire building turned inward: interior systems of surveillance and categorization multiplied in the 19th and 20th century. But before America, consider the examples of Britain, Rome, or Egypt. What made them operate well was not overt repression, but the use of organizational technique to manage vast populations, through taxes, administrators, and labor laws. As David Graeber describes in his *Utopia of Rules*, the least interesting, but most ubiquitous part of most societies are the forms of organization, or more bluntly, the paperwork.

Graeber's contention requires us to reposition how we think about bureaucracies and their place in history: it is not that empires, governments, and institutions *use* bureaucracies, but that these more overtly forceful institutions exist to perpetuate bureaucracies. Consider professions typically associated with managing the effects of violence in society: policing, government, insurance agencies, the military. What all of these entities spend the majority of their time doing is not enacting violence, but *maintaining order through paperwork*, in duplicates and triplicates, carbon copied to leave paper trails. Paperwork is not the annoyance, but the thing itself. What makes us unfree, thus, is not the projection of power by despotic entities. What makes us unfree, materially speaking, is the creation of

whole regimes designed to manage what can be done or not done, defining how that action is remembered, classifying complex human behaviors in quantifiable Excel blocks. If human life is going to grind to a halt, it won't be because we're bled to death: we'll just get tired of filling out forms.

The salient difference here between "empire" and "bureaucracy" isn't just one of how power happens, but of what it all means for freedom of action.[4] Empires had to, in some ways, corral complex beings into the direction they wanted their subjects to go. Within an empire, options might be limited, but they were *your* actions, organized and chosen: the person remained a *whole person* with complex reasons for acting, albeit one that empire now had to corral. But bureaucracy succeeds precisely by breaking down a coherent, complex people into *very simple parts*. Whereas the mechanics of empires corralled whole but controlled people, a bureaucracy organizes people by dividing them into segments, managed as sets of interests or attributes, in which only certain elements of a person counts. A whole person can revolt, but once a person is divided into parts, we are left frustrated by how to even begin to counter it. Anyone who has had to make an appeal to a bank, a hospital system, a governmental agency knows that what counts about your case is not all of the other extraneous details of time, context, and conditions: what matters is the number on the page, devoid of context and singularly important.

Within the economy of God's creation, this kind of fecundity—this kind of unruliness of stories and complex actors—is the rule. And, as we see in Scripture, the fecundity of human life means that *you*

don't exactly know what it's going to do. Within God's economy, as Marilynne Robinson puts it in her commentary on Genesis, there is an acknowledgment of freedom, and that any order which happens in creation happens in and through the fullness of what people are, not in spite of it. In Genesis, once people start multiplying to cover the earth, there is no overarching system put in place to dictate it: there is only the instruction to worship, to love God, and to be the people of God characterized by wisdom, love, and limits.

This kind of order—the "in him all things hang together" version fit for unruly, complex people—befits creation. In our thinking about what it means to be a creature of God, it is good for us to recall that God *ordering* creation is a different claim, then, than saying that God *manages* creation. For in *order*, there is fecundity and play, story and particular. In *management*, there is counting and interchangeable parts. With *order* comes chance, reversal, complexity, and the possibility that things could be otherwise. With bureaucratic management, there is only the breaking down of complexity into its most basic parts, the elimination of contingency in pursuit of regularity.

BUREAUCRACY'S SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF PEOPLE

To understand how bureaucracies lay hold of us, let us turn to their origin story: salvation from the fecundity of life. The tower of Babel is a story not only of how the people defied God's instruction to be fruitful and multiply, but a story of how they did so through the invention of a new form of *world management*. Genesis 10 offers an account of the children of Noah spreading

out across the world, from Ethiopia to Lebanon to Iran. In Genesis 11, Babel emerges for two reasons: that the people might make a name for themselves, and to keep from being scattered through the earth. What is significant here is that the family, far from leaning into the flexibility and contingency of God's preservation in the wild, turns to a new originating power to secure its place in the world.

The administrative structure of Babel—of organizing the fecundity of families in a way which suppresses any particular family—actually works. For it is only when God confuses the language does the administrative structure come toppling down in a catastrophic manner. As such, the scattered families can flee into the far countries convinced that it wasn't the *bureacuracy* that failed, but just the *language barrier*. Genesis moves on, with human life still enamored by bureaucracy, persuaded that if we can have a common language again, this could still work: the contingency of families and time can be put aside in favor of something more stable.

But administrative dreams die hard. Some generations later, Joseph, son of Jacob finds himself enslaved in Egypt, and becomes the right hand of the Pharaoh. In that time, we are told, Egypt prepared itself for a coming famine, and in the process became great in the land, with the nations streaming into Egypt to escape hunger and destitution. As we find in Genesis 41:

> **56** When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt. **57** And all the world came to Egypt to buy grain

from Joseph, because the famine was severe everywhere.

The framing here is important, that "all the world" came to Egypt, to participate and be saved by Joseph's administrative strategy of collecting grain into storehouses. Commentators during the next few centuries—rightly or wrongly—would connect the pyramids to these storehouses, linking Egypt's prosperity to Joseph's administrative skill. There's some question as to whether or not the Pharoah becomes more than just a local chieftain but a figure of international importance because of this effort. What is important to see is how this administrative structure lives up to the promise of Babel: it saves the world by saving Jacob's house, but only by once again suppressing the unruly families which made the bureaucracy possible**.** Having been put in motion in order to provide for the families of the world, it becomes the thing itself, and in the process enslaves the family who signifies the whole world: Israel. In retrospect, these kinds of developments seem like natural movements, inevitable accretions of social order, but it is important to see that Genesis sees them as decidedly *unnatural*, insofar as these kinds of strong towers are pitted *over against* the contingencies of trust in God and the bonds of family.

In Exodus 1, after the death of Joseph, a new Pharoah arises within Egypt, and the Egypt which will become the prototype which all other tyrants will aspire to arises. For in offering itself not just as a *mechanism*, but as a *world-saving system*, bureaucracy has now become not only the organizing feature of *grain*, but of *people* as well. In Exodus 1:1-7, the emphasis is on

the proliferating Israel—mentioned are the family tribes, not known for their work, but for their "filling the land": one cannot but hear overtones of Genesis' call to fill the earth, a people fecund and faithful. The contrast of Egypt's response is all the more telling: people are a problem to be managed (v. 9-10), and specifically, to be categorized according to their labor capacities (v. 11).

The problem for bureaucracy, it seems, is life. In fact, these two competing principles of human organization—labor bureaucracy and birth—are put into *contrast* with one another, in no small part because people being born is *one of the key problems with any bureaucratic system.* The naming of the children of Jacob, the celebrating of their families—all of this runs headlong into a very different principle of human organization for the sake of efficiency and accomplishment.

In case we see these two principles as simply ancient competitors, consider, for example, that health insurance is an iron-clad arrangement unless there is a "life-event," typically consisting of either 1) losing one's job status, or 2) gaining or losing a family member. Or that altering one's name due to marital status requires not celebration by the community, but multiple meetings rife with forms, attestations, and different offices. If, in the beginning, bureaucracy provides an origin story of how the world is meant to be, then life itself becomes not the way that bureaucracy persists, but life becomes a problem to be solved.

REPLACING WISDOM WITH THE RULE

Having established itself as essential to ordering humanity, the stage is set for bureaucracy to present its ordering logic as not just a rule, but as *wisdom.* The organizing ethos of bureaucracy are of the "if/then" nature, covering all contingencies, creating order from chaos, singularity out of fecundity. And in doing so, they presume to be able to not just organize the world, but offer a comprehensive vision of how to live in the world, covering all the angles in a way which will offer a fulsome vision of what to do and how: an ever-expansive vision of an ordered world. The exemplar here is not that of the overlord, but of the policy manual, a categorization system set down in endless rules, capturing contingency in its appendices.

To see this, let us return to Exodus 1 again:

> [15] The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, [16] "When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." [17] The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. [18] Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?"

In the face of the unruly fecundity of life, the administrative structure, heretofore unable to constrain Israel through labor now works more openly: to constrain the life of Israel by death. The prior rule of labor gives way to a further expansive rule, to cover not just their working hours but the beginning of all of their working hours.

But no sooner has the rule emerged, it encounters difficulties to contain the fecundity of life, for life, while governing by God, is not bound by the ordering rule in the manner bureaucracies proscribe. Siphrah and Puah appear initially as functionaries of a larger system with one aim—to keep girls alive and to murder boys—but very quickly, these two midwives replace the administrative logic with a different kind of reasoning: wisdom, the reasoning which the fear of the Lord opens up.

The Egyptian dictate, to constrain life, is airtight: keep A and do not keep B, universally murder one and universally let the other live. Does it matter that a particular boy might be strong and a particular girl sickly? Does it matter that, in a generation, you will now have no workers to build? The rule is clear, and is immune to prudence, foresight, or exceptions. But in attempting to corral life—to establish rules to govern all life—the rule has thus become *irrational*, lacking prudence, justice, and as we shall see soon, unable to inspire fortitude in others: no one will persevere in obeying an irrational rule for long. In bureaucracy, the human faces are not allowed exhaustive judgment but only able to repeat the rule itself, and frequently, this repetition of the rule is mistaken for sage-like wisdom: there must be a method to the madness. The repetitive command of the rule is mistaken for the slow-speaking simplicity of the wise; it must be *us* who are mistaken, and we must simply sit with such a rule as "kill all the boys" in order to one day see its logic.

In offering guidance to life in the form of rule, but not wisdom, bureaucracies produce living *but not reproducible* lives: they offer a vision of life which one can conform to, but which will never bear any further fruit. For a bureaucracy to continue, further rules—but not further living people—are necessary. In order to unmask the rule for what it is, all the midwives have to do is turn the categorizing rule back on itself. Making use of a categorizing trope—racism—the midwives assure the rule makers that the rule is being followed, and that these Israelite women are just too strong. The rule, they tell them, still works—it's just not quite clear enough to accomplish its aim. The reward of the midwives is in keeping with their commitments: they too become part of the problem of life (v. 20-21), given families of their own. Fecundity once again triumphs over order. Wisdom, in contrast to the impotent rule, has many children.

These themes continue to haunt us well through the New Testament as well. Bureaucratic order continues to manage the unruliness of family lines, by compelling Joseph's line to travel to Bethlehem. It continues to organize life in order to determine the conditions under which life may happen, killing infants in Bethlehem to prevent the rise of a different order. Its order is backed up by the potential use of force which it will use if the order is disturbed, in Acts, Romans, and Revelation. And each time, the power and the preservation of the Lord for humanity offers a counterpoint. The holy family escapes into Egypt makes use of new networks of stargazers and Egyptians which fall outside the bureaucratic power of Rome; the Holy Spirit makes use of Roman bureaucratic prowess to spread Gospel to the ends of the earth; the threat of death by bureaucratic order in Romans 13 is countered by a vibrant network of missionaries in Romans 16 who exhibit true life-giving power.

In drawing out these themes, let us remember what is at stake: the manner in which bureaucracies manage human life—through counting in censuses, through reduction of humans to workers, through taking the complexity of a family and shrinking it down to its city of origin. That this form became known as bureaucracy by Weber in the 19th century does not negate that bureaucracy has always been the engine of whatever empires have existed. As we see here, humanity is organized not as full humans, but according to *aspects* of humanity, with decisions about human futures made accordingly. The modern inheritors of Rome, thus, are not some new superpower, but proliferated insurance agencies, educational systems, banking systems, and political surveys. The genius of empires was always that a show of force was not needed once you could divide a person into subsets of attributes which could be put into a spreadsheet.

IF NOT BUREAUCRACIES, THEN WHAT? THE RETURN OF THE PERSON

Recovering some other vision of the world requires letting go, first of all, of the vanishing point that is bureaucratic efficiency. To recover something else requires us to ask whether or not bureaucracy's appeal to a common measure which can be scalable is the best measure for Christians to judge such things by. If bureaucracy functions through division and subtraction, organizing people as categories of labor or as instances of resources, **personalism** offers an alternate form, one which presumes that seeing a person in their particularities and in the fullness of them as a person is inseparable from questions of organization. The variations of personalism assume a common core of attention to the person in their

fullness, not just because they are created with dignity, but in attending to the person, we can begin to see something of how people are meant to live together socially.[5]

In contrast to the bureaucratic rule of Pharaoh, let us consider the example of personalism, which Dorothy Day described in this way:

> Man was created with freedom to choose to love God or not to love him, to serve or not to serve, according to divinely inspired Scriptures. Even this statement presupposes faith. He is made in the image and likeness of God and his most precious prerogative is his freedom. It is essentially a religious concept. It is in that he most resembles God.
>
> These are extreme times when man feels helpless against the forces of the State in the problems of poverty and the problems of war, the weapons for which are being forged to a great extent by the fearful genius of our own country. **"With our neighbor,"** St. Anthony of the desert said, **"is life and death,"** and we feel a fearful sense of our helplessness as an individual.
>
> Peter Maurin's teaching was that just as each one of us is responsible for the ills of the world, so too each one of us has freedom to choose to work in "the little way" for our brother. It may seem to take heroic sanctity to do so go against the world, but God's grace is sufficient, He will provide the means, will show the way if we ask Him. And the Way, of

course, is Christ Himself. To follow Him.

This "little way" is the way of attention, of thinking first of interpersonal connections as the heart of human relations as opposed to thinking first of what might fit all possible contingencies. Such a way seems antithetical to social organization, but it is, Maurin thought, the beginning: by seeing people in their particularity, you have a slower but more full sense of what a person needs, and thus, how to pair their needs with others' gifts, all toward their telos of a virtuous flourishing toward God. The question of scale is one in which human contact becomes more intensive, not less. For if the aim of organization is for the flourishing of people, it begins not with reduction to a manageable attribute but attention to a person, in their particularity and in their relation to others. Human organization and fecundity once again clasp hands.

The question of scale is not, on this count, an insurmountable one, even if it becomes more labor intensive, for the labor undertaken to administer a people is a formative one: the one listening learns to pay attention to particulars, and the one listened to is seen as a whole person. Organization takes less the form of forms and mazes of procedures than it does mentoring and counselors. Structure takes the form less of forms than it does of personal connection and local knowledge. And in the process, relational knowledge expands and creates possibilities of connection which are inconceivable to bureaucracy, for bureaucracy knows how to manage the one aspect of a person independent of other considerations, by design.

That this alternative seems slow is, I think, not a complaint, but a world in which Sabbath exists not as

the exception, but the rule. And in this, the Sabbath becomes the measure, anticipated everywhere, and in particular, in the way we relate. It is the difference between a Judge and a ruler, between wisdom and a procedure, and ultimately, the difference between life and its simulation.

MYLES WERNTZ IS DIRECTOR OF BAPTIST STUDIES AND ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY AT ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY, WHERE HE DIRECTS THE BAPTIST STUDIES CENTER IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY. HE IS THE AUTHOR AND EDITOR OF FIVE BOOKS IN THEOLOGY AND ETHICS, AND WRITES BROADLY ON CHRISTIAN ETHICS OF WAR AND PEACE, IMMIGRATION, ECCLESIOLOGY, AND DISCIPLESHIP.

EMPTY WORDS:

AGAINST ARTIFICIAL LANGUAGE

MATTHEW MILLER

Language is a place. We cannot see or know that for which we do not have at least some language, and so the language that we speak maps the boundaries of our world. Because we can see and know only what we can speak of, every new facility with language that we gain, whether a new word or a trick of syntax, expands not just what we have available to us to make sense of the world—it expands the world itself, for us. In contrast, when our language is shallow, enervated, or insufficient for our needs, so is the world we inhabit. We grope for what we need in speaking, or even thinking, and we do not find it. We depend upon terms that cannot do the work we need them to do. And we are changed: a diminished language diminishes us.

A person who possesses a lively language, rich and capacious, lives as it were within a homely house, everything well appointed and ready to hand. For a Shakespeare or a Milton, language is not a mere home but an old-growth forest, offering everything a person needs to live and more besides, with bright jeweled birds flitting in and out of view and dung beetles working quietly underfoot.

Very little of any natural language is purposely constructed, and so much within the place of language arises from beyond human intention. Artificial languages like Esperanto offer an obvious and an instructive exception, as such languages generally arise out of an understandable dissatisfaction with the messiness of natural human languages. The dream of an artificial language is that if we could just impose rational human control over our speech, we might have a language that makes better sense, is easier to learn and use, or that even works for higher human purposes of peace and justice. But it turns out that few of us want to speak a language dominated by human intention.

Accordingly, I'm tempted to choose the metaphor of an ecosystem to describe language as a complex system, something that operates with many interrelated parts, each affecting the other. Language as ecosystem points us to the mystery and sufficiency of language, those parts that exist beyond our explicit purposes. It also suggests that what we need to live can be found in this place, that language provides for us, much as a healthy ecosystem can. But language as ecosystem isn't quite right, because language still exists primarily for human purposes, while our role in an ecosystem can only ever be partial.

Every word ever spoken originates from human culture and human use, and so language must be a place that serves the needs of human beings first if not exclusively. But if language is not precisely an old-growth forest, it's also not a lab where we produce controlled experiments or an airport given over entirely to the purposes of human commerce. Perhaps the metaphor that will best serve us, then, is that of a garden. Like a garden, language exists for human purposes and under human control—it is not the wild, in which human needs serve only a part. And yet in any sufficiently complex garden things are always happening that we don't expect: new plants and animals appear, the soil composition changes, light and shade shift their balance subtly and without our notice. Properly speaking, we do not *build* or *install* or *construct* a garden: we plant and cultivate it. So language. Natural languages share with an ecosystem a complexity and mystery beyond our ability to control, and yet they share with a building the need for human care. So like a garden, language brings the natural and the cultural together to produce a place where, if we get it right, we can feel at home.

Today, the garden of language, our home, has become infested with empty words. Rather than expanding our world, this language lacking real meaning merely obscures. As in the parable, it is as if some enemy came in the night and sowed our well-cultivated garden beds with weeds. Now, with the morning breaking, we arise to find that our neat rows of flowers and vegetables have been overcome with rank and frothy plant matter, good for nothing. Or better—since many of these empty words don't arise naturally from use but are imposed on us through the machinations of industry and technology—it is as if someone came in the night and paved over our garden with a row of parking meters.

The term "empty words" does not mark a lexical category so much as a tendency of use. Few words lack meaning intrinsically, perhaps with the exception of certain jargon or coinages, like brand names, for commercial purposes. Instead, words become empty of meaning only in use. Consider the term "savings" as it's employed in commercial contexts, a word that almost always suggests that you will somehow have more money in the bank once you purchase something. Or the adjective "critical," as used in the phrase "critical thinking." Since it's hard to tell that proponents of "critical thinking" believe any other kind of thought exists, then surely the adjective adds nothing at all to the term. (Since I believe in several kinds of thought besides critique, I myself save the adjective "critical" for those occasions when I'm interested in the act of criticism itself.) Neither "savings" nor "critical" lacks meaning as such, as both terms have appropriate, even necessary, uses. In their common usage, however, they obscure meaning rather than revealing it.

An empty box, an empty pot, or an empty mind can be pleasant, because their very emptiness invites us to fill them, with a gift, with sustenance, or with a thought. Not so empty words. If we try to penetrate to their depths, they evade us. All the air removed from them, nothing remains.

Empty words are more than just a distraction or annoyance. Because language maps the boundaries of our world, an empty language diminishes our reality, making of the places we inhabit something less than they ought to be. We can see this especially clearly when we consider the language of the environment and the ecological crisis. A person who thinks of the earth, our common home, as merely an "environment"—a word which, Wendell Berry has pointed out, just means "surroundings"—is not by such a language enabled to see the earth in all its particularity. "The environment" might just be something of a green mass, important for reasons that have nothing to do with any actual plants, animals, or geological features. Insofar as we concern ourselves with "the environment" in general, our language has little to do with its actual referent, operating instead at a level of abstraction that is convenient for political debate but poorly adapted to the pursuit of real understanding. Such abstraction does not serve either real attention to or committed care for the real world, which is why all real "environmentalists" and conservationists concern themselves with particular places and species: the tallgrass prairie, the Missouri River, or the salt creek beetle. When we learn the precise names of the landscapes we inhabit, we do more for those places than any amount of empty verbiage about the environment.

Empty words blight our language, impeding virtue

formation and right action. Acting morally depends upon particularity: attention, as Simone Weil has said, is the ground of all charity, because you cannot love what you do not know. In order to respond rightly to the world, we need a conscience formed by particular language, one attentive to the differences between persons and situations. A language inflated by empty words lacks such a particularity, and therefore fails to help us grow in virtue. Consider the classic language around marriage, found in the Book of Common Prayer, in contrast with modern therapeutic language about the institution. The Prayer Book's assertion that marriage carries on "in sickness and in health," for instance, makes something of that bond that is real and meaningful and may indeed help marriages continue where they might not otherwise. Since times of sickness to one spouse will often be times of special tension for the other, "in sickness and in health"—the phrase alone—has likely saved some marriages. To lose the phrase would be to lose something of what marriage is. A less precise phrase would not serve the same purpose. It is the very specificity of "in sickness and in health," its exact and exacting meaning, that enables it to make marriage something lasting and real. Substitute for "in sickness and in health" a contemporary platitude about relationships like "do what makes you happy" and chaos ensues. The phrase presumes clarity within the person, that you already know what makes you happy. If such clarity does not already exist, "do what makes you happy" is worse than useless. In contrast, "in sickness and in health" gives clarity to a person who may be feeling rather muddled—it assumes that you might need clarification within yourself, and aims to serve you in its bracing specificity. The contemporary phrase, in its imprecision and banality, neither prescribes an exact course of action, nor spurs a person toward virtue, nor

even offers a useful heuristic for making a coherent decision. Happiness is of course a nice thing to feel, and yet we ought to remain attentive to the possibility that the word itself is tolerably vague, and therefore likely to lead us wrong.

Because they impede the formation of the conscience, empty words produce violence. In her essay "The Power of Words," Simone Weil describes "the unreal character of most of the conflicts that are taking place today" as shaped by the use of empty words. Like the Trojan War, Weil sees the conflicts of her time—the middle of the twentieth century—as centered around a phantom. In the Trojan War, "no one felt that the cost was too great, because they were all in pursuit of a literal non-entity whose only value was in the price paid for it." Yet, "At the heart of the Trojan War there was at least a woman and, what is more, a woman of perfect beauty. For our contemporaries the role of Helen is played by words with capital letters. If we grasp one of these words, all swollen with blood and tears, and squeeze it, we find it is empty." Language that lacks a clear referent is easily made a weapon: we go to war over concepts, and because these concepts have no reality, they promote perpetual conflict, because we never know whether the objective of the conflict has been achieved. Our contemporary culture war serves as a good example—one gets the sense that the primary antagonists of this war will always find a new concept to go to battle over, from "family values" to "critical race theory." These empty words serve only to keep a profitable conflict going. In contrast, for Weil, "Words with content and meaning are not murderous," because they serve to clarify rather than obscure thought, to bring conflict to a purpose and an end, rather than to prolong it over phantoms. Accordingly, "To clarify thought, to discredit the

intrinsically meaningless words, and to define the use of others by precise analysis—to do this, strange though it may appear, might be a way of saving human lives." To endorse and apply empty words, in contrast, is to feed into a system of language that perpetuates violence, and not just the metaphorical violence of offensive language, but the real violence of wars and conflicts motivated by propaganda and by empty speech.

Empty words, finally, are intolerant of silence, where a real and lively language finds its end in the quiet outside speech. Here we would do best to look at the language of modern media. Audiovisual media often exists just to fill up the quiet: think of a waiting room, or a home, with a TV blaring vacuities all day long. The language deployed in such contexts functions simply to push back the silence. Nobody really cares about the "content," whether it's an HGTV home improvement show or local news. Such empty words find their way into our individual silences too through the means of social media. Today's dominant form of social media is the short video clip, a medium designed for emptiness. A person watching eight-second clips on TikTok can't reasonably expect to be enriched or informed by the material—you can't even expect to remember what you watched a half an hour later. We turn to such media only in order to avoid silence and stillness, to save us from the terror of sitting alone with our thoughts. We turn to empty language not as a means of thought, but as a substitute for it. In contrast, a real and lively language invites us to encounter the mystery of stillness. When we finish a poem or a novel, we tend to pause, look off into the middle distance, reflect. In these moments of quiet we are feeling the effect of a language that by its nature makes room for silence.

A language constituted especially by empty words will be a language that does not allow silence, does not inspire right action, and that ultimately places us in a world smaller than reality. Such is much of our contemporary language. Moral scolds and English teachers (but I repeat myself) have of course been railing against the decline of our language for a long time. We may find it easy to dismiss their concerns on the grounds that such complaints arise in each generation. However, we seldom ask whether the moral scolds had an effect on the decline of the language, or entertain the possibility that their very scolding might have done something to arrest the tendencies they deplored. And even if they did not, the act of taking a stance about what is good in language may be necessary for a writer to clarify his or her own place in letters, even if such a place is only that among the moralists. If I propose to add myself to their number, it is because in this weedy garden, I need to clear a spot where I can stand.

Perhaps the most profound meditation on empty words that I know is Aldous Huxley's 1932 dystopian novel *Brave New World.* The book depicts a society dominated by the desire for "social stability," which is to say, comfort and predictability. All reproduction is artificial, carried out in large factories where the residents of the World State are genetically manipulated and behaviorally conditioned to fill their predetermined social and economic role. Lest any discontent with that role arise, the state provides perpetual entertainments: consequence-free drugs, sex with an endless array of willing partners, and expensive electronic entertainment. Huxley's World State is a post-industrial paradise, where scarcity no longer exists and human comfort is all. The constant distraction and amusement ensures that residents

of the World State want nothing more than they've got. Politically, the book's key insight is that the most critical threat to our freedom arises not from some big-government strongman imposing his will upon us, but from our own appetites. With all their lusts fulfilled, the citizens of the World State have no interest in political, religious or intellectual freedom. Their lives have meaning only in chemical highs, frequent orgasms, and electronic entertainment—and that's precisely how they want it.

Into this post-industrial playground Huxley places his protagonist, John. Born outside the industrial and cultural system of the World State, John possesses the last vestige of culture in Huxley's world—he has found and read a copy of William Shakespeare's complete works. So powerful does he find Shakespeare's words—though, without a teacher or any cultural guidance, he understands them only partially—that John speaks almost entirely in Shakespearean diction. When asked if he's John, he answers, "if I do not usurp myself, I am"; when he's exposed for the first time to the World State, he cries out "O brave new world." Empowered by Shakespeare's language and moral vision, John resists the World State's offer of limitless comfort. He spends himself in ultimately futile conflict with the system, claiming his "right to be unhappy."

While *Brave New World* is often discussed for its reflections upon statism, bioethics, and technology, I have come to feel that issues with language form the heart of the book. The debased residents of Huxley's World State speak a language of propaganda, euphemism, jargon, and babble. Their signature form of language is the slogan, of which they have many, regularly repeated: "Never put off till tomorrow the fun you can have today," "When the individual feels,

the community reels," "Everybody's happy nowadays." Along with the slogans, citizens of the World State speak a generally childish and attenuated language, in which elemental concepts like family relationships or human emotions are replaced with juvenile chatter and inhuman jargon. A sexually desirable woman is referred to as "pneumatic"; religious leaders bear the title "Arch-Community Songster"; participants in ritualized group sex chant "Orgy-porgy, orgy-porgy."

With great precision and no small measure of humor, Huxley delineates the contrast between this empty language and John's speech, derived from his knowledge of Shakespeare. Like George Orwell's *1984,* to which it is often compared, *Brave New World* becomes a warning about how the abuse of language leads to an abuse of people. Unlike *1984,* however, the empty language of *Brave New World* is not imposed by a domineering government, but arises from the desires of the people themselves. Accordingly, the book indicts us in our own misuse of speech.

As with any use of empty words, the language spoken by the citizens of the World State diminishes their reality. Huxley highlights this attenuation especially in the character of Helmholtz Watson, an "emotional engineer" or "propaganda technician," tasked with coining the slogans that shape the language of the World State. Helmholtz is, in other words, one of the most advanced users of language in the World State. Just so, he feels the insufficiency of the speech he has available. Ruminating over his work with his friend Bernard, he comments: "I'm thinking of a queer feeling I sometimes get, a feeling that I've got something important to say and the power to say it— only I don't know what it is, and I can't make any use of the power." Helmholtz has a gift for coining a pithy

phrase, "the sort of words that suddenly make you jump," but the only subject matter his society gives him to write about is banal, putting a hard limit on the power his words can exercise. He comments: "It's not enough for the phrases to be good; what you make with them ought to be good too." In fact, though, even Helmholtz's way of describing the language he's looking for is insufficient. What he's looking for is a concept of poetry, but the best he can do is to describe powerful language lamely as "X-rayish." When John introduces him to true poetry in the form of *Romeo and Juliet,* he can't appreciate it: his experience in the contracepted, deracinated World State leaves him unable to understand the tragedy of Juliet's situation. He laughs, "Who's going to get excited about a boy having a girl or not having her?"

Eventually, Helmholtz will attempt his own poetry, an act of great courage that will get him exiled as a threat to social stability. The poem includes some vivid language depicting loneliness:

> Midnight in the City Flutes in a vacuum, Shut lips, sleeping faces, Every stopped machine, The dumb and littered places Where crowds have been: …

And yet quickly the poem's attempt at a poignant note of sadness descends to crass absurdity:

> Absence, say, of Susan's, Absence of Egeria's Arms and respective bosoms, Lips and, ah, posteriors, Slowly form a presence; Whose? and, I ask, of what So absurd an essence, That something, which is not, Nevertheless should populate Empty night more solidly Than that with which we copulate, Why should it seem so

squalidly?

For all his desire to exercise his powers of language, ultimately Helmholtz lacks the substance to write with power and beauty. His culture of empty words has left him bereft of this capacity. His world is not large enough to produce a language of true beauty and power. The empty language of the World State thus leaves its citizens diminished in their experience, able to think only in superficialities.

Another of Huxley's central characters, the "pneumatic" young woman Lenina Crowne, provides the best illustration of another pernicious function of empty words, their tendency to erode virtue. Throughout the book, Lenina is the most consistent parrot of the slogans composed by people like Helmholtz. Despite this comfort with the principles of the World State, Lenina finds herself powerfully attracted to the outsider, John. Although he reciprocates the attraction, their differing expectations around relationships and sexuality cause problems: Lenina is accustomed to the free love culture of the World State, while John has learned from Shakespeare the ideal of chastity. For a while, largely due to John's reticence, their relationship stalls, as Lenina experiences mounting sexual frustration, an experience she's never had before. Finally she gets John alone. She proceeds with his seduction as she knows how: she whips off her clothes and almost literally throws herself at him. John resists in words drawn from *The Tempest*: " 'The murkiest den, the most opportune place,' (the voice of conscience thundered poetically), 'the strongest suggestion our worser genius can, shall never melt mine honour into lust. Never, never!' he resolved." And yet Lenina "too had poetry at her command, knew words that sang and were spells and beat

drums." Her poetry is the empty slogans of the World State, spurring her toward unfettered lust: " 'Hug me till you drug me, honey,' " she sings, " 'kiss me till I'm in a coma. Hug me, honey, snuggly…' " Thus Lenina's vapid language tends toward a lack of restraint even as John's Shakespearean diction forms his conscience.

It might be tempting to describe these two different systems of language according to something like an idea of cultural difference: John's language encodes one set of values, Lenina's another. But in fact the difference is more fundamental than that. The emptiness and childishness of Lenina's language makes it inimical to virtues like temperance or prudence. Her vocabulary employs the crudest metaphors and simplest language, with no words over a single syllable and no concepts that require even a modicum of thought. Similarly, the slogans' sentence style operates using the most basic and immediate imperative sentence structures, without any complex relationships between ideas. To speak of self-control or thoughtfulness using a vocabulary like hers or the simple rhythmic sentence structures she employs would be difficult if not impossible—the very form of the language enacts a lack of restraint. In contrast, John's quote from *The Tempest* requires the exercise of the mind to understand the significance of images like the "murky den" or concepts like one's "genius." Moreover, the sentence employs a subordinating sentence structure, in which the primary verb ("melt") arrives only at the very end of the thought. As such, the form of the sentence models control, demanding sustained attention and care from writer and reader to grasp the meaning. We therefore can't simply say that different languages inculcate different values. A language defined by emptiness can only tend toward a certain kind of values, those that undermine any

notion of virtue whatsoever. Such is Lenina's empty language, in stark contrast with the virtue-forming language of Shakespeare, spoken by John.

Ultimately, John's story demonstrates how empty words crowd out substance and space for silence. As the book winds to its conclusion, John goes looking for solitude, settling in an abandoned lighthouse between two helicopter paths, like a hermit saying his orisons while encamped on a highway median. There he tries "to remember…unceasingly to make amends" for the "civilized" depravity of the World State. He works and prays, and when his labors and ruminations fail to end his sensual memories of Lenina, he chastises his body with thorns and a whip. For all his efforts at an eremitic lifestyle, at silence and solitude, John is rewarded by the World State with a media frenzy. His strange behavior, and especially his self-abuse, provokes the curiosity of the masses, and he's quickly the subject of a documentary ("*The Savage of Surrey*"), despite his violent attempts to repel the videographers. Thus Huxley anticipates how modern media can get grist for the mill even from a rejection of its standards, anticipating the tendency of modern social media to assimilate even anti-modern ideas into its technological and entertainment regime. ("Like and subscribe for more ideas about traditional living! Stay tuned to our YouTube channel for all the latest on disconnecting from technology and getting back to the land!") Accordingly, John's pursuit of the silence that would ground a true and lively language rapidly devolves toward the babble and jargon of the World State, his silent meditation pierced by urging cries of "orgy-porgy."

Huxley's *Brave New World* thus depicts the consequences of empty words as contaminants in the ecosystem of our language, diminishing our reality, eroding our values, and banishing quiet.

If these are some of the effects of empty language, we have yet to say enough about their causes—what brings this empty language into being. I want to conclude this essay by noting one of the sources of empty language in Huxley's book, an artificial voice. Like many of Huxley's other ideas, if anyone found such an idea outlandish in the 1930's, we surely can do so no longer. And as in *Brave New World,* our new producers of artificial language pollute the garden of our language with empty words.

In almost his last act before self-imposed exile, John attempts to persuade a crowd of World State workers not to take their daily allotment of drugs. Though John "had never spoken in public before, and found it very difficult to express what he wanted to say," eventually "rage" makes him "fluent." His fluency, however, tends not toward Shakespearean diction but emphatic repetition and sentence fragments. He howls at the crowd: "'Do you like being babies? Yes, babies. Mewling and puking. … Yes, puking. … Don't you want to be free and men? Don't you even understand what manhood and freedom are? … Don't you? … Very well then…I'll teach you; I'll *make* you be free whether you want to or not.'" Not exactly inspiring stuff. In fact, though Huxley describes John as fluent, his language has broken down as he struggles to communicate with an audience that cannot comprehend even the fundamental concepts (freedom, adulthood) he employs. Driven to desperation by his failure to communicate, John turns to action and begins destroying the drugs, inciting a riot as his audience attacks him for stripping them of their soporifics.

How the World State quells the riot is instructive. No jack-booted thugs, billy clubs, or tear gas here. Instead, the riot police pump in clouds of the same drug the crowd had been about to receive, reducing them to happily blubbering embraces. And through the clouds of happy gas comes

> the Voice of Reason, the Voice of Good Feeling. The sound-track roll was unwinding itself in Synthetic Anti-Riot Speech Number Two (Medium Strength). Straight from the depths of a non-existent heart, "My friends, my friends!" said the Voice so pathetically, with a note of such infinitely tender reproach that, behind their gas masks, even the policemen's eyes were momentarily dimmed with tears, "what is the meaning of this? Why aren't you all being happy and good together? Happy and good," the Voice repeated. "At peace, at peace." It trembled, sank into a whisper and momentarily expired. "Oh, I do want you to be happy," it began, with a yearning earnestness. "I do so want you to be good! Please, please be good and…"

These comments represent the epitome of the language practices of the World State: they are as empty, as sloganized, and as infantilizing as can be. The Voice speaks in the pure *form* of persuasion with no content. Nothing it says carries any real meaning—not simply because its statements are pure emotional appeal with no substance, but because there is no speaking subject behind the words. The statement "I do want you to be happy," in particular, means nothing because there is no "I" to want any such thing. Accordingly, the comments of the Voice aren't language in the typical sense of the term, a form of communication. They are more akin to the laughing gas of the police than to any real human speech—they are pure sensation, a whiff

of mood without a whiff of meaning.

The Voice's comments, of course, share their repetitive and essentially uncommunicative nature with John's argument. However, John's appeal represents an attempt (if a failed one) to appeal to the minds of his audience. They fail due to John's human weakness and no other cause. The artificial words of the Voice, of course, succeed—but they do so by treating the audience almost as if they are robots themselves, pure stimulus-and-response automata. The language practices of the World State thus have rendered its citizens only responsive to a simplified form of language. They communicate like robots, and so only a robot can effectively communicate to them.

In a talk with the tongue-in-cheek title "How to Preach to Robots," the theologian Kirsten Sanders has pointed out that automatic language-processing tools like smart speakers require us to simplify our speech. We adapt our speech to make sure that the voice recognition technology doesn't misunderstand us. Sanders comments:

> But do you see that part of the problem here is that you, a person, are *talking* to a machine? And that in order to solve this problem you begin to talk in a way the machine would understand— as if you were a computer, more than as if it were a human.

> You talk to Siri as if *you* were a computer, not as if *she* were a human. So in communicating with a machine, you make yourself into one.

The anti-riot Voice demonstrates that Huxley's World State is a whole civilization habituated to talking not with one another, but with machines. Here, then, is

one of the primary roots of their empty language: words that are adapted to the comprehension of robots.

Reading *Brave New World* ought to suggest to us that if we speak to robots in a way they understand, we risk filling language, our home, with empty words. Language generated by an algorithm cannot help but be empty, because it lacks a speaking subject to intend it, like the artificial Voice of Huxley's novel. Whatever meaning such language receives will be assigned to it interpretively and second-hand by human beings. When we generate prose from ChatGPT or another large language model, we produce words that are only *potentially* meaningful as we choose to give them meaning, because no person has spoken them to give them meaning at the start. Anyone who uses such a tool will likely assign secondary meaning to the words produced, and yet in so doing that person will have come to think of those terms as empty containers for meaning. The words will not be alive in themselves, but mass produced, dead objects which the audience consents to give meaning in the absence of a speaker having invested them with that meaning from the outset. A world of automatically generated language thus undermines the human liveliness of speech. A language dominated by automatic text generation is no longer an ecosystem, but a factory floor.

A language reliant upon automatically generated text will thus be a place increasingly infested with empty words. If words are dead objects rather than living thoughts, and our language something mechanically contrived, then values like particularity, accountability, and quiet no longer obtain. Mechanically generated words pile up heedlessly and endlessly, like the infinite scroll of the internet, as the writer Charlie Warzel has observed. Why search thoughtfully for the exact right word when more can be generated with the press of a button? Why stand by your words when they have been generated by an app? When will we ever find silence if a sleepless robot stands always ready to generate ever more words?

We must reject the tendency to turn our language into a factory floor, and should instead cultivate the garden of speech. We must eschew empty words, and seek after lively ones. We must refuse to turn our language over to robots and speak as and for human beings.

To do so will require us to forgo the use of the automated tools that are industrializing our language—to be new Luddites of language. Such a forswearing will come at a cost, because it is entirely possible that, as in *Brave New World,* we will find ourselves outclassed in persuasion by synthetic voices. But it will be worth the cost if we can preserve in the garden of our language some corner free of empty words.

MATT MILLER, A NATIVE NEBRASKAN, TEACHES ENGLISH AT COLLEGE OF THE OZARKS IN POINT LOOKOUT, MISSOURI. HIS FIRST BOOK, TITLED LEAVES OF HEALING, WILL APPEAR FROM BELLE POINT PRESS IN 2024. FIND HIM ONLINE AT MATT-MILLER.ORG.

The Christian in a Therapeutic World

IAN HARBER

There have been numerous pieces published by secular media outlets and influencers lately warning of the rise of "therapy speak." While hard to define, you could loosely say that it is the prescriptive use of psychological and therapeutic terms in everyday language to describe one's experience, identity, and the various situations in life. You hear it most in the overuse of words like "trauma," but it shows up in many other places. Shame, attachment, inner child, trigger, holding space, gaslight, anxious, depressed, narcissism, boundaries, vulnerability, PTSD, OCD, self-care. The list of these words and phrases seems nearly endless and, more importantly, suddenly ubiquitous in the lexicon of the average Millennial and Gen Z person today.

The important thing to say immediately is that all of these mental ailments are *real,* which is why it's almost impossible to write a critique of a therapeutic culture without sounding like you're diminishing the reality of these experiences. In no way do I wish to say that these things aren't legitimate. They are. But the fact that these things are real is almost the point. The "prevalence inflation," as Derek Thompson at *The Atlantic* called it, leads to people who don't actually suffer from clinical mental health disorders seeking help they don't need and drains resources from those who actually do.

Take one example that was reported by *The Verge*—the rise of self-diagnosed Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID; previously known as multiple personality disorder) on TikTok. Doctors across the country realized that they were beginning to see patients who were seeking confirmation for a self-diagnosis regarding the disorder after they had learned about it on TikTok. Many of them didn't have it. One doctor said, "I've had people cry in my office because I told them that they do not have the diagnosis that they think they have." The patients were *sad* when they realized that they *didn't* have dissociative identity disorder. You would think it would be the other way around.

This led the doctors to worry about the patients who had convinced themselves that they had a mental health issue that they didn't actually have, but also to worry for those who *did* have it. Harvard Medical School's largest psychiatric facility, McLean Hospital, said about this phenomenon, "We are sincerely concerned that this trend on social media will further marginalize individuals living with DID, while also doing a disservice to those who are living with another treatable but misidentified disorder." Self-diagnosis of mental health disorders on social media is a lose-lose for both the person who has self-diagnosed *and* for the person who actually has the disorder. While I imagine that most of us don't know someone who has self-diagnosed with DID (though maybe you do), the prevalence of therapy speak as a native language has become an increasingly live issue for many folks as they talk with their children, siblings, friends, coworkers, and church members. For many, psychology culture is becoming their defining social narrative. Going to therapy is a sign that someone is "doing the work." "Healing from trauma" means that someone is finally "getting healthy." But is this producing the results that people are hoping it is? It

doesn't seem like it is. Not because therapy is bad or it doesn't work, but *because the ideas of what therapy is and is supposed to do have changed*. It's become more important to appear as if you are "doing the work" than to actually do it.

From Derek Thompson, quoting Darby Saxbe, a clinical psychologist at the University of Southern California, in *The Atlantic* again:

> "That's a big problem because this modern idea that anxiety is an identity gives people a fixed mindset, telling them this is who they are and will be in the future.' On the contrary, she said, therapy works best when patients come into sessions believing that they can get better. That means believing that anxiety is treatable, modifiable, and malleable—all the things a fixed identity is not."

That, in a nutshell, is the shift that our therapeutic culture has caused. The shift from mental health disorders being largely "treatable, modifiable, and malleable" to being an "identity" that "gives people a fixed mindset, telling them this is who they are and who they will be in the future."

THE EFFECTS OF A THERAPEUTIC CULTURE

In light of all of this, the first question we have to ask is: Is this shift making us better? The rising consensus from mental health professionals seems to be a resounding "No." The same article in *The Atlantic* cites a study of more than 8,000 students in the U.K. who participated in a mindfulness program only to find that their anxiety became *worse.* Because therapeutic culture constantly turns us inward, we become overly

aware of every uncomfortable situation we are in and the negative emotions we feel.

Not only that, but it trains us to believe that because we are experiencing something uncomfortable or negative, there must be something wrong—either with *us* or with *them*. Not only have we begun to diagnose ourselves, but we've also started diagnosing *others*. Armed with only what we've seen on a handful of TikTok videos or a graphic from a therapeutic influencer's Instagram—without any training, experience, credentials, or professional understanding—we label other people with therapeutic labels and mental disorders because they loosely match a description of something we heard someone say one time. Either we're anxious, or they're a narcissist. Either we're OCD, or they're shaming us. Either way, it creates the perception of being a perpetual victim of either your own psyche or other people's neuroses.

Being a perpetual victim not only increases anxiety out of constant fear of being triggered, but it also erodes your relationships and isolates you. Because you're constantly protecting yourself from triggers, whether from your own or from what you perceive in others, you don't allow yourself to foster the necessary connections to develop deep relationships. Every interaction is a potential threat that could trigger discomfort, so it just seems better to stay away from as much interaction with other people as possible.

Esther Perel, Belgian American psychotherapist and host of the podcast *Where Should We Begin?,* said in an interview with *Vanity Fair*:

> "There's a paradox. There is such an emphasis on the "self-care" aspect of it that is actually making us more isolated and more alone, because the focus is just on the self. The focus is not about the mutuality of relationships—the reciprocity, the way that you weave fabric, you know, between people who are relying on each other. On one hand, there is an importance in gaining clarity when you name certain things. On the other hand, there is a danger that you lose all nuance, that you're basically trying to elevate your personal comments and personal experience by invoking the higher authority of psychobabble. What you call therapy-speak, we used to call psychobabble—it's a new word for an old concept.
>
> In the past, you could have said, "I think this, and so does the rest of the community." So does the family, so does the church. Today you say, "I think this, and so does the DSM-5." I don't like what you do, so I say you're gaslighting me. You have a different opinion, and I bring in a term that makes it impossible for you to even enter into a conversation with me. Labeling enables me to not have to deal with you.
>
> But in the end, it creates more and more isolation and fragmentation. That is not necessarily a good thing for the community and for the social good."

While we turn to therapy in order to heal our inner wounds, more and more people are finding themselves even more anxious and isolated than they were before. As they turn inward, they damage relationships with people who would otherwise be there to help them through difficult circumstances. This isn't necessarily because therapy is broken but because of *how we have begun to use therapy* as a buffer between us and the

uncomfortable realities of life when it was never meant to function that way. The more we avoid the hard knocks of life, the more we're hurt when we're hit by them. So, the very thing intended to help us become more resilient in a difficult world ends up making us more fragile.

MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS AS A STATUS SYMBOL

There is a second important question we have to ask about our therapeutic culture: why would self-diagnosed mental illnesses be viewed as an attractive status symbol? It almost sounds perverse to say. Obviously, those who experience mental distress don't consciously compute it as a status symbol. And for people who sincerely have mental disorders, it *isn't*. Again, this is a difficult topic to critique when you're discussing something that is both real and distressing. Yet, that's exactly how Dr. Saxbe characterizes it in her interview with Derek Thompson in *The Atlantic.*

> "Darby Saxbe, a clinical psychologist at the University of Southern California and a mother to a high schooler, told me she has come to think that, for many young people, claiming an anxiety crisis or post-traumatic stress disorder has become like a status symbol. 'I worry that for some people, it's become an identity marker that makes people feel special and unique,' Saxbe said.'"

In a therapeutic culture, it seems like *everyone* has a mental health disorder. And if everyone has one but you, then *you're* the weird one for being "normal." They endow an identity to someone who otherwise doesn't know who they are without it because they have nothing else to identify

with. Even while you might feel intense mental distress, you can't imagine your life without it.

There is just a certain vibe—if you allow me the use of some therapeutic language in my critique—that something *should* be wrong. It's not that the people who claim to be having these experiences don't actually have them. I believe they are. It's that the cultural narrative they have bought into and organized their life around creates a self-fulfilling prophecy—a catastrophic feedback loop—that creates the circumstances for the very thing they go to therapy to seek relief from.

Esther Perel in *Vanity Fair* again:

> "In the past, you would have said, "I'm a member of this party," or "I go to this church." Now you say, "I'm a member of this attachment group." I think that putting people in boxes and reducing their complexity is problematic. If you start to name yourself by one little thing, you know, like, "I have insecure attachment," what are you saying about yourself? Why do you want to reduce yourself to one over-important label?
>
> Also, what this does is put clinical terminology into the hands of nonclinically trained people who then weaponize it. There's a reason we go to school for umpteen years and continue to be trained until we drop dead, because we still don't know it all. It's very important to show that therapy is a highly relational, nuanced, and contextual conversation. That is very different from what you get on TikTok or IG or your friends

in armchairs."

Part of this has to do with the fact that suffering and struggle are unavoidable parts of life and are some of the primary ways we find meaning and purpose and form our identity. Yet, in a decadent society, many people exist insulated from substantial external suffering and struggle while actively seeking to mitigate it in their lives. People work more with their minds than their bodies, have instant access to near-infinite knowledge in their pockets, and are encouraged to look within and find themselves by participating in wellness capitalism, all while shunning traditional meaning-making roles and responsibilities. This means struggle is primarily experienced in the mind without the traditional means of alleviating the struggle, such as physical work, meaningful community, loving familial relationships, and faith in God who uses, redeems, and is sovereign over our suffering.

The breakdown of our families, communities, institutions, and faith has led to us having an identity crisis, as everything that we traditionally found our identity in is liquidated by individualism, secularism, globalism, and the digital age. With nothing left outside of us to give us an identity, we have nothing left to identify with except for what is inside of us. And when many turn inside to look for their "true self," what they find is despair. The human soul was never meant to be alone, and it cannot be found apart from a loving connection with God and others.

Everyone experiences despair, not only those who are disconnected from God and others. Even Paul said that he "despaired at life itself" at one point (2 Corinthians 1:8). Yet despair was not his only or the defining emotion even under the most tumultuous

of circumstances. He saw the trials as sharing in the suffering and comfort of Christ (1:5), sanctifying (1:9), and temporary (1:10). He set his hope on the Lord (1:10) and knew he could count on others to help carry his burdens (1:11). While everyone feels despair, Christians have a different experience of despair from the rest of the world. But if despair is all that's found and there's no loving connection with God or others to form an identity, then despair itself becomes the identity and is given the label of however it manifests itself in the person's life.

But that's not all. Because one is pushed to find their identity in their inward despair by social isolation in the first place, finding people with the same self-diagnoses on the internet creates a pseudo-community that fills the space where family, friends, and the church would have traditionally been. People find others who have the same experiences as them. Online communities form around shared lived experiences. Each post for the community serves as a reinforcement of the identity and perpetuates both the disorder (in its unmitigated acceptance and celebration) and the isolation (in drawing people out of IRL relationships and into online relationships with people who "get them"). The more someone owns their identity and produces content around the identity, the more they are rewarded by the community and gain status among the group.

That's how you end up with social media influencers with millions of followers who make content exclusively about ADHD, OCD, DID, anxiety, and pretty much everything else. This dynamic creates a feedback loop where someone spirals into a worsening condition than they were in before. The pseudo-community provides just enough taste of the real thing that it keeps them from realizing they've

been sold a counterfeit for real, loving, trusting, deep friendship.

THE POTENCY OF THERAPEUTIC CULTURE

This cocktail of individualism (read: crippling isolation) and social media is what makes therapy-speak so potent. With no way to find our identity outside of ourselves through faith, community, institutions, etc, and with the epistemological horse-blinders of social media, the only way for us to find a recognizable identity is by identifying with the despair in our minds as reinforced by the messages we see on social media.

In Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel *Brave New World,* the children are educated through a new technology called "hypnopædia." Hypnopædia, in the novel, is a method of education where a series of phrases and ideological axioms are repeated incessantly through speakers placed under the children's pillows while they sleep. They are meant to learn and accept the axiomatic assertions as unquestionably true. The mindless, unconscious repetition of the "truth" is the point. As Huxley writes one scene where students are listening to a government official,

> "Family, monogamy, romance. Everywhere exclusiveness, everywhere a focussing of interest, a narrow channeling of impulse and energy. 'But every one belongs to every one else,' he concluded, citing the hypnopædic proverb. The students nodded, emphatically agreeing with a statement which upwards of sixty-two thousand repetitions in the dark had made them accept, not merely as true, but as axiomatic, self-evident, utterly indisputable."

Earlier in the scene, the official says that hypnopædia is "words without reason" and "the greatest moralizing and socializing force of all time." The goal of hypnopædia isn't an intellectual education but a *moral* and *social* education—a moral and social education void of reason. Its effect is described as,

> "Not so much like drops of water, though water, it is true, can wear holes in the hardest granite; rather, drops of liquid sealing-wax, drops that adhere, incrust, incorporate themselves with what they fall on, till finally the rock is all one scarlet blob. 'Till at last the child's mind is these suggestions, and the sum of the suggestions is the child's mind. And not the child's mind only. The adult's mind too—all his life long. The mind that judges and desires and decides—made up of these suggestions."

The highly online life is akin to being educated by hypnopædia. Scrolling TikTok for hours alone is qualitatively no different than listening to "sixty-two thousand repetitions in the dark." The same messages are being algorithmically served to us based on our interests—or let's be real: based on our neuroses—and are consistently reinforced through short, quippy videos on auto-play that are designed to capture our attention, stir intense emotions, and provide easy answers through axiomatic truths that are presented as self-evident and utterly indisputable. This happens until your mind is made up of the axioms, and the axioms make up your mind, and sound reason can no longer penetrate to discern what is true and what is false anymore. This is why social media is a distortion zone. The result of social media being the

chief architect of someone's plausibility structures is best understood as a kind of "internet brain." Unfettered, isolated, and vulnerable social media use liquidates meaning, purpose, identity, community, and moral reasoning and replaces it with moral words without reason that undermine "Family, monogamy, romance. Everywhere exclusiveness, everywhere a focussing of interest, a narrow channelling of impulse and energy"—the very things that give us meaning, purpose, identity, and community. All in the name of freedom and fulfillment that it simply can't deliver.

CHRISTIAN LIFE IN A THERAPEUTIC WORLD

What are ways that Christians can live, witness, and navigate the complexities of a therapeutic culture? I believe there are at least three. 1) Occupy a different existential space, 2) Embody a different story, and 3) Cultivate a different quality of life.

Occupy a different existential space

While the therapeutic culture insists that we are the center of the world and our identity is something we create, Christianity insists that God is the center of the world and our identity is given to us by him. The explicit retrieval needed here is the Creator-creature distinction.

When we view ourselves as a creature who is in creation and under the creator God, we're relieved from the pressure to embody God's incommunicable attributes. We are able to embrace our natural limits and not feel the need to consolidate all power, knowledge, and presence in our small human frame. We can rest in the God who is over all things, sustains all things, and cares for all things. When life spins out of control, we have a God who we can trust, who isn't scared of the things that scare us, and who cares for us enough to carry us through all of our struggles and suffering. Not only that, but instead of creating our own identities by trying to find value and worth through achievement, technique, and our unique neurosis, we receive our identity as royal image bearers, beloved sons and daughters, and coheirs to an eternal inheritance from him. No matter what happens in our lives or brains, we know that those things are not the truest things about us. Our value, worth, identity, meaning, and purpose are not things that we can find or achieve on our own but are gracious gifts from our Creator that we receive through humble, restful trust.

Embody a different story

The therapeutic world tells us a story for us to live in. It tells us that the goal of life is to find peace, that the problem in the world is whatever causes us pain or discomfort, that the world is a dangerous place full of exploitation and trauma, that the way to find peace from those things is purely utilitarian—whatever works for you is fine, and that the best thing we can do is to minimize as much discomfort as possible. The path to the good life is through "doing the work," and if you do all the things you're supposed to and don't find peace, then it's simply because you didn't master the right technique and should try something else.

On the contrary, the Christian story is one of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Restoration. It tells the story of a good creation that God delights in, people made in his image with a royal vocation to lovingly represent him to each other and care for his world, but people have fallen and experience brokenness and distress because we failed to trust him and sought glory for ourselves, yet in our sin, he has given us

himself out of love to restore us to the good creation we were intended to be. Our lives and this world are not dependent on our perfect techniques because he will one day make everything new and establish perfect justice and righteousness forever and ever.

We are not the center of the story, the point of the story, or the writers of the story—we are *participants* in the story that God has written and is writing. We have a purpose and a role to play, and God has provided a way for us to fulfill our role through the healing of our souls and adopting us into his family, the Church.

Cultivate a new life

Jesus told his disciples before his crucifixion, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your heart be troubled or fearful" (John 14:27). While the therapeutic world offers various kinds of technique to find peace, Christians recognize that peace is something Jesus gives us through his Spirit. It's impossible—a contradiction even—to achieve peace; peace can only be received.

Christians are people who bear a yoke and a burden, but it's an easy yoke and a light burden (Matthew 11:30). We can't carry the heavy burdens of the world. We aren't meant to find our belonging or affirmation in our achievements, perform our unique idiosyncrasies as our identity, and let our lives be guided by the latest trends on social media. We find belonging in thick relationships and commitment to the people of God. We receive peace through prayer, worship, silence, solitude, confession, and the sacraments. We cultivate wisdom for life through scripture, spiritual reading, and the counsel of trusted

friends. And yes, we go to therapy to work through deep wounds that need careful attention. But we have hope that God is at work in those deep, dark places and doesn't waste any struggle or suffering that we have experienced for the healing of our souls, our transformation into Christlikeness, the good of our community, and the restoration of the world.

In short, Christians live from a fundamentally different existential map. We see beyond the band-aid fixes of our modern ailments and root ourselves in something that is simultaneously ancient and eternal. We order our lives around the truth, goodness, and beauty of God revealed in Christ and embodied in his church.

The therapeutic culture is trying to solve real ailments. We're more fractured, isolated, and devoid of meaning-making roles and institutions than ever before. The digital age has raptured us from our bodies and communities and drained us of the very things that make us human. But the good truth for our time—and all eternity—is that the God-human, Jesus, has made a way for us to recover our humanity. In Christ, we are made *more* human. We are united to divine love and given eternal rest. In the midst of the chaos and uncertainty of our modern world, Christ offers us peace. And in Christ alone—our comforter, our all in all—our fears are stilled, and our strivings cease.

IAN HARBER IS A WRITER AND MARKETING MANAGER AT ENDEAVOR, A DIGITAL MINISTRY. HE WRITES ABOUT RECONSTRUCTING FAITH IN HIS NEWSLETTER, BACK AGAIN.

A Conversation on Psalm Chanting with Brittany Hurd

JOHN AHERN

JOHN AHERN: Thanks for doing this interview, Brittany. I wanted to begin with a simple question: Why did you start Canticlear?

BRITTANY HURD: I started it partially because I got a brain tumor and partially because I was upset that nobody else was doing it. It was when Alastair Roberts started his daily Bible reading and lectionary that I got kind of irritated that nobody was doing something similar with the Psalms. So I decided I would do that. And since it was the beginning of the pandemic, it seemed like a great time. Except I still had a full-time job, so it was *not* so great a time, actually. So I had to table that for a while.

But I ended up with a brain tumor that took my eyesight, so I needed something to do while I was in the hospital and found that much of what passed the time well was singing. And happily, I have been in the church my entire life. So I had quite an arsenal of hymns at my disposal. Not nearly as many Psalms, though. And so that brought the idea of the project back to me. Then Susannah Black Roberts, now Alastair's wife, who is also a friend of mine, pushed me to actually put this into action.

JA: You mentioned Alastair was doing the daily lectionary, and you said you were annoyed that nobody was doing that with the Psalms. But to much of evangelical Christianity, that wouldn't be an obvious source of annoyance. Why should the Psalms be treated differently? Why Psalms in particular? Is that something that you're interested

in singing?

BH: Well, in this particular case it was because the Psalms are involved in the daily lectionary reading, so that was the original inspiration for it. Also, my church music background contains a lot of Psalms. I went to school in Idaho and they are very big on singing the metrical Psalms in the church community there in Moscow. During my time at New Saint Andrews, we got a new music professor, and he was super big on the Psalms, to say nothing of Dr. [Peter] Leithart, who was my theology professor, and also a big proponent of Psalm singing and Psalm chanting in particular. So I have three big influences: the metrical Psalms with both my home church and then out at school, the through-composed Psalms with Dr. David Erb, the professor of music there at New Saint Andrews, and then Psalm chant with Dr. Leithart and James Jordan and a lot of the Theopolis guys.

JA: So when you were in the hospital, why was it that you felt dissatisfied with merely being familiar with the hymns? What did you feel was lacking in not being able to bring to mind the Psalms and have music for that as well?

BH: It was less that I felt dissatisfied and more almost guilty (although I don't think technically you should feel guilty for only knowing hymns, because hymns are great). But there were a couple of metrical Psalms in the mix that would continually come to me. But a lot of times I thought, "Oh man, I wish that I had the Psalms always in my head rather than just man-made hymns." And I think that is a primary reason why

I've been digging into this so voraciously. I suppose when you have a big health event, it serves us so many different kinds of wake-up calls. So this was one of the many things where I said, "Oh, I should be doing this." Of primary importance—and this is something that all three, James Jordan, Dr. Leithart, and Dr. Erb, are all about—when you are singing the Psalms, especially to chant or to through composition as Dr. Erb likes to do, you're singing the actual words of scripture with no paraphrasing, no forced rhymes, no "Yoda speak," that sort of thing. So what could be better than that? So that is definitely high on my list for "Why the Psalms?"

JA: Yes. Now, for our audience who may not be as familiar with these categories, could you give us an explanation of "metrical"? You mentioned metrical, chanting, and through-composition. So what are each of those? What do they look like?

BH: Yeah. A metrical Psalm will look a lot like any hymn that you're used to singing. All of the verses of the Psalms will be put to poetry. So it all has a nice rhythm to it and is usually rhymed in just about four lines for each musical verse, if not the verse as it's laid out in scripture

JA: Paraphrased, then? Not a literal translation?

BH: Paraphrase. And then through-composition: we'll take a little snatch of melody that we might call a motive, and put the text to music, matching the music to the text as-is. And that is not only musically

matching it, but matching it in tone and emotion. So the music is constantly changing throughout, which makes it a little bit difficult for congregations to sing. And with chant, you have a couple of short melodies that you fit the words into the music. So you'll have what they call a reciting tone, which is the first note of the small musical phrase, and you usually put most of the text to that first tone and then move through the rest as far as the metrical emphasis.

JA: That's great. Now, which do you specialize in over at your channel?

BH: I'm trying to specialize in Psalm chant because that is the quickest way to learn all the Psalms musically. The melody tends to be pretty simple, so anyone can learn it. And since it's repeated so much, you can find different emphasis in it as you go through.

JA: You can do literally the text of the Bible.

BH: You're literally using the text of the Bible as you would with through-composition.

JA: As you said, there's less of a learning curve than with the through-composition, right?

BH: Absolutely. For me, not so much because I quit piano when I was 12, and you have—

JA: To accompany yourself.

BH: Yeah, I have to accompany myself. It's surprising how difficult it is to learn 20 chords. It *is* very simple to learn just the melody to it—so as long as you've got somebody who can accompany you. Hopefully my channel will serve to help folks in that way.

JA: Now, when most people hear "Chant"—when they hear your YouTube videos, of course, they will be disarmed and immediately fall in love with what they're hearing—but when most people hear the word "chant," they get a bit scared away by the connotations. There's kind of a *weird* factor there, unless they grew up, of course, in the Anglican tradition, or Catholic tradition, or Lutheran tradition that maybe still does it. But unless you have grown up with it, it seems like something that most people in 2024 wouldn't just naturally be interested in doing unless they were LARPing. So how would you pitch what you're doing to those people?

BH: Well, I called it Canticlear for a reason, using the Latin word for "singing" and the English word "clear." I want the music to be both *clear* and *beautiful*. And when I say "beautiful" and "clear," I mean not just in recording quality or the sound of my voice or the playing of music, but also in the manner in which it's communicated. So it should be understandable—audibly understandable, but also emotionally understandable. You might say, in the theater world where I come from, you want to understand—you want the audience to understand—the action behind what you're saying. And so that's where I'm trying to

come to.

And to your point about the way what people tend to think of chant, they tend to think it's either sort of ethereal, something that you might hear—and it's beautiful—from King's College Choir, Cambridge. But it's not very understandable unless you actually know what they're saying because of how wonderfully resonant the space is. Or it's in some industrial chapel somewhere, and it's a bunch of people just kind of droning along, and we want neither of those things. So I'm attempting to chant the Psalms in a musical-theater style, which kind of baffles people a little bit, but I think it makes sense of what I'm doing when you listen.

JA: Yes. You preempted my next question, which was precisely that truly unique aspect you're offering to this space is not just that you're doing it on YouTube, but that you're using a music theater voice, music theater diction. I am so used to hearing these chants as like, a line of a Psalm spoken with this kind of British diction, the "Queen's English," or as you say, the mumbling of an aging mainline congregation. And you're just doing it with a kind of clear, straightforward American accent, and you're doing it with a voice that is pleasantly trained but also not operatic. And I assume those are all intentional decisions. So what are some of the intentions there?

BH: Well, partly it's just what I like to hear myself. I was searching around for something that I could listen to that I would be able to clearly hear what

they were saying, and it would sound like they knew what they were saying. That might exist somewhere, but I wasn't able to find it. And so I think that's my primary reason. Also, it's in line with my training: my voice teacher in high school, anytime I would try, I'd probably do a few classical pieces, and she would say, "Okay, I'll get you an operatic aria. But your voice is really suited to musical theater, so can we mostly work on that?" Which is really a blessing because a lot of voice teachers will say, "No, classical or nothing." So it really is, I guess, a personal preference thing. But I think the musical theater as an art form has really nailed communicating fully through song. As immensely talented and well-trained as opera singers are, the emphasis tends to be on technique rather than on effect, I guess. I think the emphasis in musical theater is on the effect of the product.

JA: And it also seems like you're not sacrificing your identity as an American to do it in that way. There's something about traditional European opera sound that really is not built for American English. It's adopting the habits and customs of Germans and Italians, basically. But there is a distinctively American way of communicating deep emotion that isn't pop music. And it does seem like,suddenly, when you put it that way, music theater is the natural choice there.

BH: Musical theater is America's greatest gift to the world, if you ask me. I have a friend who's of very similar musical theater taste to me, and we used to joke that Americans were really more suited to musical theater than the English (even though they do put

on good productions), because the English, being so reserved, can't really do the emotional bombast that a lot of lot musical theater requires.

JA: Let's not forget about Gilbert and Sullivan.

BH: That's right.

JA:Let me ask you a little bit about how this has personally affected your devotional practice. One thing that we've already mentioned about Psalms is that they are historically the bedrock foundation of Christian piety, personal piety, personal devotion, but also corporate worship. They sang them, specifically singing Psalms, not just reading them quietly to themselves. So do you have any thoughts on that? How has doing Canticlear affected your devotional life?

BH: It's become quite a part of my devotional practice, but separate, I guess, from the sort of morning prayer devotional bit of my day, because just having to repeat it so many times. I have to memorize it before I even record. Since I'm blind, I can't actually read it while I'm singing it. So I have to fully memorize every Psalm, which can be challenging when it's over 25 verses. So I have to repeat it so many times that I notice patterns that I wouldn't have otherwise noticed, maybe a repeated theme stated in different ways, anywhere from five to 20 times in the course of the Psalm.

It might just be the ones I've chosen thus far, but it really brings home the faithfulness of the Lord. I mean the Psalmists, all of them—however many there are—are continually coming back to lovingkindness, the merciful goodness of the Lord, and what some call covenant faithfulness. And that is an immense help when you're going through it, because a thing that I realized on my own health journey, if you will, is that we tend to want to see where the narrative is going. It's like, "Okay, where am I in this story now? And so what can I expect around this corner?" But I realized that the reason that we should pay attention to narrative in scripture and the lives of our fellow saints is not so that we know what's coming next, but so that we should be reading the right stories, as it were, so we have a constant reminder that the Lord is faithful. However this story that I'm in right now is going to turn out, the Lord is faithful and good. That's what the Psalmists continually go back to over and over and over again, and it bowls me over every time.

JA: That's one thing I was noticing recently: a lot of Christians who do traditional worship and sing hymns, who might think they have "arrived", are actually still quite allergic to negative emotions sung in worship. And one of the things that any book on the Psalms will point out near the very beginning is that, actually, a majority of them are despondent or in an imprecatory mode that is generally on the negative side of the emotional spectrum. And that's something that just never gets explored almost at all in hymns.

BH: Yeah, you have the "Be Still My Souls" and the ones like that. But one thing that the Psalms do repeatedly is that, by putting what we might call

negative emotions on display, they're also teaching us how to deal with them. The Psalmist is not just ranting on Twitter about it. He's going to the Lord and saying, "Look, this is what's going on with me, and you keep telling me you're good. So do something about it." And we often find that he does, and we should expect that he will.

JA: That's fascinating that you're having to memorize all of them first. One of the things that you see in all of the various different apologies for Psalm singing—I'm thinking of Spurgeon, Calvin, and then going back throughout the Middle Ages to the various monastic apologies for Psalm singing—what they all mean is "memorize." They don't have this vision of recreationally singing, although that's quite nice. It's lovely to recreationally sing the Psalms. That's something we need to do more often. But what they mean is—for instance, in Psalm 119, when it says, "Bind it to your fingers and put it in your heart; hide it in your heart"—these are all idioms for memorizing. That's what these are for. It's a design feature. And so I find that fascinating that you're having to do that.

BH: The music lends itself to that too. Anytime I hear now even a paraphrase or a different translation of the Psalms that I've recorded, I think, "Hey, that's the one." And it just plays in my head.

JA: It drags the rest of the Psalm with it.

BH: People who have listened to Handel's *Messiah,*

this happens to them all the time too. They hear something from Isaiah, and all of a sudden there's a full chorus in their head singing that verse.

JA: What are some of the resources that you're using to do the chanting? There are different options out there that exist. What do you use?

BH: Yeah, so I'm using the *Anglican Chant Psalter*, the green one [Alec Wyton, 1987]. And that is just because that's what we used at New Saint Andrews when we would do morning prayer sometimes. But my Anglican congregation is using the new *Book of Common Prayer* for the Anglican Church in North America [2019]. So I wanted to be able to serve them first. So I'm actually repointing the text to the Psalm tone, which is its own exceptional exercise for both devotion and English practice.

JA: It's very, very tough to do that.

BH: I started out doing it as close to the exact same sort of breaks as the *Anglican Chant Psalter*. And then I realized it was actually more straightforward for me to just go it alone.

JA: Let's backtrack really fast: What is pointing?

BH: Pointing would be deciding where to put the musical emphasis on the line. Which words are going to land on the new note? There's only a few notes

to play with, so you have to decide which words are going to get that stronger emphasis. And that's what pointing is.

JA: Yeah. Okay. So there's that green one, and then you use the text of the new ACNA *Book of Common Prayer*. Do you use other resources? Is that the main one?

BH: Yeah, so that's the main one for the sort of performance aspect, you might say. But I also am using Ian Hamilton's new commentary on the Psalms to help with the structure because I have to memorize it. It's easier to know what the structure is, and then also so I know what sort of musical variation I might want to add. I'm not super talented at the piano, so largely that has to be dynamics—playing loud or soft. And with what kind of strength I'm attacking the line, you might say. And just to know more about the Psalms, it's great.

So I began this project with the Psalms that were most helpful to me while going through all my surgeries and all that sort of thing. And then I've just started using a book called *Psalms for Trials* by Lindsey Tollefson. And so I'm going through that one in order. I used that as a devotional during my recovery. I found it quite helpful. And then after that, it would be—I don't know—catch as catch can. Whatever suits my fancy or whoever pays me the most on Patreon.

JA: Gotcha. Okay. There's one more thing I was going to ask. I imagine your pace—I mean, it's amazing that

you've already put out as much as you already have, but your pace has to be fairly slow. Or how long do you think it's going to take you to get through the whole Psalter?

BH: My goal is to get to the point where I can put up one a week, but I think an interim goal might have to be one every two weeks, which would take me somewhere between three and five years, I guess, to get through the Psalter, because I'm not going to do Psalm 119 all at once. I'll do that in 24 sections.

JA: Awesome. Well, that sounds phenomenal. Thanks for your time!

JOHN AHERN IS A GRADUATE STUDENT PURSUING A PHD IN MUSICOLOGY FROM PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

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BRITTANY HURD IS THE CREATOR OF CANTICLEAR, A YOUTUBE PROJECT TO PRODUCE CLEAR, BEAUTIFUL RECORDINGS OF THE SONGS OF SCRIPTURE FOR ALL GOD'S PEOPLE TO LEARN AND ENJOY— PRIMARILY IN CHANT AND THROUGH-COMPOSED SETTINGS.

Rediscovering Political Authority in an Age of Expertise

BRAD LITTLEJOHN

I: INTRODUCTION

It's not hard to see that authority has fallen on hard times in American public life. For generations, activists on the cultural and political Left have exhorted us to "question authority" and Hollywood has served up a steady diet of heroes and heroines to model for us such courageous non-conformity. Conservatives, while somewhat more likely to stand up for religious and perhaps parental authorities, have not hesitated to lay their own axe to the tree of political authority, preaching a political gospel of liberation from "big government"—a term elastic enough to encompass the Social Security Administration and the small-town zoning board. Even the so-called "New Right," which loves to mock the libertarianism of the Old Right, tends to be authoritarian only when fantasizing on Twitter; in real life, most of its adherents are as likely to jaywalk or open-carry as anyone.

In the intellectual realm, progressives have engaged in a decades-long project of "deconstruction" and "critical theory" to interrogate every received orthodoxy for any hints of "power" and "privilege." Meanwhile, conservatives, fed up with what they see as the Marxist capture of academia, frequently encourage the American reflex for anti-intellectualism, sneering at the follies of "experts" and instilling a habitual distrust of anything claiming to be "mainstream" or "consensus."

This crisis of authority was thrown into stark relief in 2020, when public health authorities were seen as little more than tyrants by the Right, and law enforcement authorities were similarly pilloried by the Left. Today, a large majority of Americans cannot recognize an act of political authority as such; they perceive it as either brazen oppression or craven abdication.

Where did this crisis of authority come from? It would be tempting to blame it simply on Americans' overheated love affair with freedom. Indeed, this is the conclusion to which many "post-liberals" have come, from Catholic integralists to "Christian nationalists." Having subsisted for centuries on the heady draught of Lockean liberalism, so this narrative goes, Americans have grown drunk on liberty, are obsessed with individual autonomy, and accordingly cannot help but oppose authority—freedom and authority being opposites on this conception. The problem, on this account, lies with our unruly *demos*, headstrong and restless, in the face of which authority seems powerless.

Although I share much of the post-liberal critique, and agree that our obsession with autonomy has led us badly astray, I do not think this is an adequate narrative of the roots of our present crisis. It is not enough to pin the blame on "too much freedom," for as we will see, rightly conceived, authority and freedom are not opposites. Our problem with authority stems in large part from our tendency to confuse or conflate different types of authority: specifically *epistemic* and *political* authority. This confusion is nowhere so widespread as among authorities themselves. If they do not know how to act rightly as authorities— specifically as political authorities—then we can hardly be blamed for failing to recognize and respond to them as such.

II: WHAT IS AUTHORITY?

Let us begin, however, by offering a very general account of what authority is, before attempting a more precise classification. As soon as we begin to look closely at the idea of authority, we will discover that far from limiting, restricting, or opposing freedom, authority is *what makes free action possible*. It is, in the words of Oliver O'Donovan, "the objective correlate of freedom." This claim has become so counterintuitive to us 21st-century Americans that it might require a bit of unpacking.

Suppose I am giving a lecture at a conference. Why am I free to give that lecture at that conference? Well, because the conference organizer invited me and the conference organizer is answerable to the board of whatever organization is holding the conference. In other words, the organizer has authority, and on the basis of that authority he had the freedom to act and, in turn, to give me the freedom to act. Without such an act of authority, I might have been free to get up from my seat and step up to the lectern for a minute or two, but presumably after some awkward scrambling and whispering behind the scenes someone would have forcibly removed me. Authority, in other words, authorizes—as the centurion says in Matthew 8: "For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes."

We may make another related point: in any collective undertaking, which requires coordination of many parts, freedom necessarily rests upon authority. This point was vividly illustrated by Victor Austin in his book *Up with Authority* by the example of an orchestra. No trombonist, cellist, or violinist is free to play a Beethoven symphony without a conductor to coordinate their actions toward a shared end. They could play their parts in some sense, to be sure, but they would be heard only as constituents of a cacophony, not as parts of a symphony. Without the authority of the conductor, the musicians would not be free. Or, to use another metaphor more appropriate to college

football season, even the best running back is very unlikely to be free to run for a touchdown except by submitting to the play-calling authority of his coach and quarterback.

Even trivial decision-making quite frequently rests upon authority. When I go to buy toothpaste at the drugstore, I may reach for the tube that boasts "#1 Doctor-Recommended" or the tube that boasts of its plaque-fighting abilities—not because I really understand what plaque is, but because my dentist told me it was bad. To be sure, authority is not the *only* source of reasons for acting. I could decide purely on the basis of personal preference—perhaps I am particularly vain about the whiteness of my teeth, and so I choose the toothpaste that promises a "triple whitening agent." But why should this decision be more "free" than the former ones?

Authority and freedom, then, are not in a zero-sum relationship. *Power* and freedom are, however, and authority is often confused with power, especially by those seeking to discredit it. But whereas power represents simply a capacity to accomplish something—as a tiger or indeed a vice-grip has power, a power that can certainly limit my freedom—authority represents a capacity to undertake, and to enable others to undertake, *rational* action. By providing reasons for acting, authority avoids the zero-sum game of power: seeing the reason you provide, I *want* to act, and thus your authority expands my freedom rather than contracting it.

So far, so good. But if you were paying close attention, you might notice an important difference between the examples above—the toothpaste example represented a case of epistemic authority; the others were forms of *political* authority. So let's spend some time unpacking

the distinction.

III: POLITICAL VS. EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY

Before I do, two caveats are in order. The first is that I use the word "political" for lack of a better catch-all term, but do not let your minds become pigeonholed within the sphere of elections, legislators, or even policemen. What I am calling "political authority" happens on the Little League field, the corporate boardroom, the school, and the battlefield. The second is that these refer to different *forms* of authority, not necessarily different authorities. One and the same person may at different times and different contexts function as an epistemic authority and as a political authority, although it will be helpful to all involved if he is very clear about when he is functioning as which. Within the household, for instance, we see parents tasked with exercising both forms of authority vis-à-vis their children.

In fact, let us begin there, in the household, to observe the difference between the two. On the one hand, as father, I am tasked with instructing my children in the way that they should go. I do this through times of explicit teaching, through warnings and admonitions, and hopefully through an example that I model. I function as an epistemic *authority* because presumably I know things that my children do not; my greater education, experience, and wisdom equip me with a greater ability to act, and with the ability to provide them good reasons to act. For instance, if I am teaching my daughter to ride her bike, I can model the technique, explain the principles, and encourage her to keep pedaling and she'll stay up. My knowledge provides her a reason to act. However, notice that it does so precisely as it passes over from

me to her. She receives this knowledge and acts on the basis of it. A good epistemic authority should quickly work themselves out of a job. I know things that my children do not *yet* know, but if I teach them well, they may soon be teaching me. My fourteen-year-old son, for instance, is already teaching me as much about Aristotle and English literature as I am teaching him.

We may be tempted to think that this is all there is to parenting: sharing knowledge with your children until they surpass you. But anyone who has parented knows there is a sterner side; there are times when the only appropriate response is not a detailed explanation but "Because I said so." Why? How could that possibly be a sufficient reason for action? Well, because I am an authority, tasked by God with making decisions on the child's behalf until he can make decisions on his own. My wife and I make decisions about how much the family should spend on pizza and entertainment, not my kids. To be sure, I may also teach my kids, especially when they are older, about budgeting, but notice the distinction. When I teach my kids how to budget, I am exercising epistemic authority, transferring wisdom to them. But when I simply make the household budget, I am exercising political authority, using my wisdom in the absence of theirs. There is to be sure sometimes a middle term, in which I lead by example, and in so doing tacitly transfer knowledge. But not every exercise of authority has to be justified as a form of teaching; in point of fact, my wife and I do most of our family budgeting after all of our kids are in bed!

While the parenting example hopefully elucidates the distinction I am seeking to draw, it may also confuse in part, because parenting is temporary. As both epistemic *and* political authority, I ought to

work myself out of a job as a father, equipping my child with both the knowledge and the courage to make decisions on his own. It is I think one of the standing temptations of modernity to imagine that all exercises of political authority, all forms of inequality and hierarchy, may be similarly transient. "Upward mobility" is our economic paradigm, describing a dream in which the lowliest janitor may some day find himself in the top-floor executive suite. Similarly in politics, the democratic ideal is one in which any citizen may one day be president. Since we each see ourselves destined for greatness, we think that we each need to be educated for greatness. If I am one day to be manager, then I need to understand what the manager does and why; he shouldn't just bark out orders to me but needs to patiently explain the rationale for every one of them. If I am going to be part of the legislative process, then as a citizen I need to understand the rationale for every law, and shouldn't be expected to obey it until I do.

There is a healthy Christian impulse at work here. The movement of Scripture is from slavery to sonship, from worship by the letter to worship in the Spirit. The New Testament church is one in which believers are not meant, as in so many other religions, to mindlessly follow the prescriptions of the priest, but to exercise a lively and rational faith, thinking the Master's thoughts after him. This basic Christian impulse, purified and given fresh life and vitality at the Protestant Reformation, has lain behind the astounding literacy, social mobility, and democratic participation of modern Western society.

But it is our perennial temptation here, as everywhere, to immanentize the eschaton. The full transcendence of political authority, of the need to obey "because

I said so," will never happen this side of the Second Coming. Even those of us who rise high in the pecking order will still find ourselves, for most of our lives, in myriad relationships where we are called to submit to someone else's authority without knowing, or needing to know, most of the reasons why they are acting and commanding as they are. A good leader will not ask for blind allegiance—he wants humans, not puppets, after all—so he will often pause to explain some of his reasoning. But frequently it will not be feasible to do so: either because there is no time, or because few are actually equipped to understand him, or perhaps because he himself is not even certain about what needs to be done, and yet something must, in fact, be done.

Hopefully this gives you a clear sense of the basic distinction between political and epistemic authority. Let's delve a little deeper now into a key implication of it.

Political authority must *decide*; epistemic authority can, however, reflect or analyze more or less indefinitely. Indeed, it is usually considered to be a virtue of good science to be falsifiable, and regularly falsified. Scientists are forever revising their judgments, and this not because they are incompetent, but precisely because they are competent enough to keep digging deeper and spotting new problems and new possible solutions. All the while they do so, they may continue to exercise effective epistemic authority, transmitting to their students a richer and richer understanding of the problems and possible solutions. Political authority, however, does not necessarily have this luxury, for political authority must terminate in *action*.

This difference has important implications in a world full of uncertainty. In the realm of theoretical knowledge—particularly if we confine our attention to one small fragment of reality at a time, as much modern science does—real certainty is often possible. Some things can be shown to be true by definition, others to be empirical facts. Where certainty is not possible, moreover, the epistemic authority may proportion his confidence to the level of certainty that the data permits, and invite us to do likewise. Scientists are accustomed to this kind of bet-hedging, often offering explanations or predictions with a "90% confidence interval" or a "95% confidence interval." Such claims come with a proviso: "By all means believe this, but not completely; it could turn out to be wrong."

In the domain of action, however, such bet-hedging is not always possible. Often we are stuck with the choice to act or not to act. Acting merely 70% or 90% of the way is futile, or perhaps worse than inaction. Consider a man who is unsure whether a particular train is the one he's supposed to catch. He could take his chances and hop on board, or he could hold back, hoping that if the train *was* the one he was supposed to take, there will be another one later. What he clearly cannot do (without hazard to life and limb) is 70% board the train and 30% stay on the platform.

And yet it is precisely such 70/30 scenarios (or sometimes 51/49 scenarios) that political authority is called upon to navigate all the time. So it has been with many of our recently politically polarizing dilemmas. One expert might argue for the necessity of wearing a face mask to slow the spread of infection, while another might question the efficacy of such measures

and emphasize the psychological harms of impairing face-to-face communication. In confronting such a dilemma, a public authority might choose to order a mask ordinance, or he may refrain from doing so; what he cannot plausibly do is prescribe that everyone wear a mask half on their face and half off, or wear a mask 50% of the time.

The necessity to act amid uncertainty becomes even more obvious in the case of policing. An officer may be unsure of whether a suspect is armed and threatening, but he will need to make a decision—often a split-second one—to shoot or not to shoot. To halfway shoot at the suspect may still get the officer in trouble if the suspect turns out to be unarmed, and it may still get him killed if the suspect *is* armed. Similarly, when it comes to a disputed presidential election, judicial authorities must ultimately rule in favor of one contender or the other; they cannot suspend judgment indefinitely or invite the rival candidates to share power.

At the heart of all properly political authority, then, lies the necessity of making decisions. Such decisions ought to rest, wherever possible, on a long train of careful deliberations; they should not be the product of mere whim or arbitrary fiat. Nonetheless, every decision ultimately requires that the authority figure terminate this train of deliberation and cut off debate.

What all this points to is the fact that while neither epistemic nor political authority necessarily undermines freedom, they reconcile command and freedom, heteronomy and autonomy, in different ways. The epistemic authority does so via *transmission* (or at least potential transmission), the political

authority by *representation*. Let me explain.

Recall our point earlier about authority providing *reasons for action*. This is most obviously true in the case of epistemic authority. If someone tells me the stove is hot, I withdraw my hand. If a trustworthy scientist tells me that getting a vaccine will reduce my chance of serious illness, I will, all things being equal, get that vaccine. If my own trusted doctor tells me that the vaccine is *not* a good idea for me, then I may change my mind. In each of these cases, I am acting freely, because I am acting rationally on the basis of information transmitted to me by an authority. Sometimes this transmission is not actual, but potential, as when a chemistry teacher writes a complicated formula on the board and produces a counterintuitive result. If he's a good chemistry teacher, I am likely to accept his result as true, and if he tells me to set up my experiment accordingly, I am likely to do so, even if I don't yet understand the numbers involved. Do I still act freely? Well yes: because he is an epistemic authority, I trust that he has a grasp of the relevant facts, and that if I similarly grasped them, I would know that was the right way to set up my experiment. What he knows, I do not yet know for myself, but I believe it is knowable, and in the meantime, I act accordingly, hoping I will soon come to know it for myself. My action is free, because it represents the act I myself *would* choose were I fully in possession of the facts. Note however that such cases ought to represent the exception, rather than the rule: since the purpose of knowledge is to be transmitted, I shouldn't rest content with allowing someone else to know on my behalf.

When it comes to political authority, however, I must

rest content with allowing someone else to decide and act on my behalf, because this is necessary if a multiplicity of actors are to arrive at a common action. And I do not, crucially, need to understand and agree with the action that is taken—I do not even have to accept that *if* I understood, I *would* agree (as in the case of the chemistry experiment). "Theirs not to reason why; theirs but to do and die" represents an extreme case of obedience to political authority, its *reductio ad absurdum* if you will, but the phenomenon itself is not absurd. Consider again a football team. The running back may not understand why a particular play is being called. Or he may understand, and think it is a daft idea. But he should still run it, and if it is in fact a daft idea, let the coach or quarterback learn that lesson for himself. The alternative would be an endless series of delay-of-game penalties, as every player argued his case with the quarterback. Obviously on a well-functioning team, players will *often* understand the rationale for a play, and coaches will seek to educate their players in their philosophy, so political authority should not be *divorced* from epistemic authority—but it cannot be reduced to it.

If political authority cannot necessarily reconcile freedom to command by means of transmission, how does it do so? By *representation*. The political authority is one who *acts on my behalf* or *in my place*. There is a vicarious nature to all such authority. Since I am free by definition whenever I act for myself, I can also be free, by extension, when another acts as *myself*, when I act through another. This is a principle regularly recognized in law: if for any reason I am not capable of acting for myself, or if I have contractually agreed to have another act on my behalf, then the actions of that agent or attorney are treated *as if they were my own actions*. But representation may operate

informally as well. In any political unit (again, using that term in the very broadest of senses), the one who leads stands in for those whom he leads, and may act on their behalf—whether it's a parent setting the household budget or a Little League coach scheduling practice.

I recall first vividly appreciating this in one great scene of an otherwise mediocre movie, Ridley Scott's 2005 *Kingdom of Heaven*. The Arab leader Saladin is about to attack a Christian fortification when Baldwin IV, King of Jerusalem, appears at the head of his army. Saladin pauses the attack, declaring, "Jerusalem has come." The city or indeed kingdom of Jerusalem can be said to be present on that field in the person of its king. A remarkable conversation ensues, in which Saladin and Baldwin quickly negotiate a cease-fire and Baldwin promises to punish the errant noble who had provoked the conflict. On both sides, many of their followers resent the agreement—it is not the agreement they themselves would have made—but it is made nonetheless. Political authority has acted, it has acted representatively on behalf of the whole, and it has acted decisively, bringing about an action of the whole.

So then, we discern a fundamental distinction: when it comes to *political authority*, I am free paradigmatically because *another acts on my behalf*; when it comes to *epistemic authority*, I am free paradigmatically because *I learn how to act on my own behalf*. With all this hopefully clear, it remains to (1) briefly explain why this distinction has been blurred over the past century; (2) the baleful consequences of this blurring; and (3) finally, how to revive the idea of political authority.

IV. THE CONFLATION OF THE TWO

AUTHORITIES

Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century—I will carry on the convenient convention of pinning the turning point at the election of Woodrow Wilson—we witnessed the rise of the politics of expertise. Experts were in high demand, for this was the point in history at which the complexity of human life had radically increased, but the availability of information had not yet caught up. In the age of railway timetables, trans-Atlantic steamships, and Gatling guns, it quickly became clear that the sturdy common sense and hoary maxims of the *Farmer's Almanac* would no longer suffice. The world urgently needed men of science who could make sense of the profoundly complex new phenomena that had enmeshed the human race.

Thus civilization increasingly handed over the keys to the car (another of its bewildering new inventions) to a new clerisy of scientific managers who promised to make sense of the complexity. The idealistic declarations of public servants and university presidents in the age of Woodrow Wilson and FDR are quaint not only in their un-self-conscious confidence that they could speak truth and mold policy, but that people would actually listen. And listen many did: Franklin Roosevelt was swept into office with unprecedented margins on the coattails of a sincere pledge to rely on his "brain trust" to solve the biggest economic crisis in history.

The cult of scientific management extended the alluring promise to reconcile the American ideal of individual liberty with comprehensive, rational social control, in an age where representation no longer seemed likely to do so. Consider: by 1900, the explosion of national and international industries that could not be realistically regulated at the state level meant that many policies (as Theodore Roosevelt recognized) had to be made at the national level. But by 1900, this nation contained 100 million citizens. It is not easy for 100 million people to see themselves in a single political leader, to see the authority of national law as anything other than a foreign imposition on their freedom.

After all, my freedom is threatened by an external agent if I want to do X while you tell me I must do Y. But what if you can tell me—and demonstrate scientifically—that Y is what I *really* want to do, or at any rate what I *would* want to do if I had the relevant information? Faced with the need to make a host of difficult decisions for the common good of an immensely complex society, the bureaucratic emissaries of Wilson's "New Freedom" saw in knowledge the power to shape the destiny of the nation without the old-fashioned authoritarianism of ordering people around. Rather than risk bruising political debates over what ought to be done, they proposed to let science answer that question. Political authorities would serve merely as the dutiful executors of what the data prescribed. This emasculation suited politicians well enough for it allowed them to disperse responsibility; if something went wrong, it must have been due to some obscure fault in the data.

Accordingly during this period, political authority exhibited a strong tendency to clothe itself in the fashionable garb of epistemic authority, masking as much as possible its distinctively political nature. The Third Reich's revolt against spineless technocracy, combined with its deification of will over intellect, only cemented the Wilsonian trend among Western nations: Any attempt to ground political action on a less-than-scientific basis was dismissed as fascism. This conflation of political and epistemic authority

continues down to the present day, as seen in the "follow the science" mantra.

V. THE BALEFUL CONSEQUENCES OF THIS TREND

Unfortunately, the "hide behind the expert" act isn't working out as well as it used to be. When experts carried immense epistemic authority, it made sense for political leaders to try and borrow some of that authority for themselves. But that only worked as long as there was a clear hierarchy of knowledge, and an apparent unanimity to the voice of expertise. Experts knew this well, and thus sought to hash out their many disagreements behind closed doors. But the internet blew those doors open, revealing a cacophony of arguing voices. Dissident scientists looking for recognition could use the internet to build a following, and the average Facebook user cannot reliably tell the difference between a genius and a crackpot. The authority of expertise has accordingly crumbled, not into dust, but—what's much worse—into dozens of opposing shards, frequently weaponized against different factions of the body politic. Such open scientific debate (minus the crackpots peddling real conspiracy theories, at least) might actually be a blessing to civil society, but it is a disaster for political authorities who have hitched their wagon to the horse of expertise.

After all, while a plurality of perspectives certainly must feed into the political process, authority itself must be unitary when it commands: it cannot command five different things at once. And thus it can no longer say, "Let's just do what the experts say" when the experts are saying five different things; if it privileges one set of expert opinions over the others (whether for good reasons or bad), social media will lose no time in foregrounding the alternatives as reasons not to obey.

Indeed, on the premise that political and epistemic authority are the same, there is no reason for a citizen to obey a law unless and until he agrees with it. We have seen that this is one of the crucial distinctions between epistemic and political authority: epistemic authority (ideally at least) is transmissible: it provides information and invites me to form my beliefs accordingly. Political authority however operates vicariously—it does not usually provide all of its reasons, and it demands obedience anyway. When political leaders frame their orders as simply the distillation of the data, they tacitly invite citizens to examine that data for themselves and withhold obedience until convinced. Given that most laws can only function if the vast majority of citizens comply, and many laws will never command more than a slim majority of public agreement, such a posture implies the effective breakdown of political society.

Finally, recall what we said about certainty. Epistemic authority is often able to provide very high levels of certainty, and can usually quantify whatever uncertainty remains. Political authority usually concerns itself with situations of very high uncertainty. By cloaking itself in the garments of expertise, though, it has frequently been tempted to claim (or pressure its experts to claim) much higher certainty for its projections than is plausible. Indeed, as Martin Gurri notes in *The Revolt of the Public*, government experts have made sometimes preposterously ambitious claims for what certain policies can achieve, and how well they can predict the relevant variables. The predictable failure of these predictions has profoundly weakened the authority of both the experts and the

political leaders who have linked their own credibility to them.

VII. RESISTING THE SEARCH FOR THE STRONGMAN

We can now venture a pithy definition of political authority as *the authority to make decisions between incommensurable goods amid uncertainty, and to compel obedience to these decisions*. Such compulsion *can* happen through mere force and fear, but this constitutes a replacement for authority rather than its exercise. Political authority operates where we recognize that (a) a decision must be made, (b) the situation is fraught with uncertainty, and (c) this leader is the man for the job, whether by virtue of his office or his personal qualities—ideally both.

Political authority requires profound courage. There is a reason why, since antiquity, political authority has been closely linked to the battlefield. It was the task of kings to go out to war, and if they did not do so, whatever captain *did* successfully lead the people in battle was likely to find himself the beneficiary of a coup.

This dependence of political authority on military authority is not nearly as quaint as we might think: From George Washington to Dwight Eisenhower, a startling number of U.S. presidents ascended politically due to their demonstrated martial prowess. The battlefield, after all, throws into sharper relief the perils that face every political leader. In war, decisions must be made; they cannot be put off indefinitely until all the data is in or full consensus is reached. Despite every attempt at fact-finding or soliciting wise counsel, the general must often act amid terrible uncertainty. He must choose between

incommensurable goods: Should he sacrifice lives in order to gain time, or sacrifice time in order to save lives? His decision cannot be merely personal; it must be a binding command. Others must follow and obey, even when they themselves are profoundly uncertain about what must be done and are not privy to most of their commander's reasons. Anyone who can keep his head and summon others to action in the face of such doubt and peril is likely well equipped to guide a people through the perils of peacetime.

As the battlefield example highlights, effective leadership entails a willingness to embrace risk—even if a general does not lead his men on horseback into a storm of bullets, he must still assume the massive psychological and reputational risk of *being wrong*, and of *being seen to be wrong*. He makes high-stakes gambles that could end in humiliation—something that flies in the face of the advice every political strategist and corporate lawyer gives his boss. We live in a culture of risk-management, a society in which every little decision must be data-crunched, focus-grouped, and insurance-hedged before it can be acted upon. With a horde of advisers to lean on, every politician and CEO can rest assured that if something does somehow go south, a dozen scapegoats stand at the ready. This abdicatory approach to leadership turns out to be Faustian bargain: Our leaders might keep their offices longer, but these offices are steadily drained of any real authority; witness Congress's current approval rating—22% at the time of this writing.

Starved of real authority, society casts about desperately for replacements, latching on to every brash defier of convention as a potential savior. Donald Trump's extraordinary success was due

largely to his willingness to ignore the rules of the risk managers and data-crunchers, his apparent readiness to personally shoulder the burden of calling the shots as political leaders once did—even if, when crunch-time came, he proved more than willing to divert blame onto scapegoats. The uncanny success and bizarre mystique of Elon Musk owes much to the same phenomenon: This corporate leader conducts himself more like a medieval lord on horseback than a bureaucrat in a boardroom.

On the "alt-right" (or whatever they're calling it these days), this backlash against spineless political leadership has taken an increasingly troubling turn. Columnists at *First Things* in recent years have extolled the virtues of the 20th-century fascist dictators Antonio Salazar and Francisco Franco, and in the more uncensored atmosphere of Twitter, self-proclaimed "Christian nationalists" are more than willing to push one or two steps further: why not rehabilitate Mussolini? Heck, why not Hitler? Man, those were guys who knew how to get a job done. They saw what they wanted, and they went for it. They knew how to mobilize the manhood of a nation, and how to steamroll those lily-livered liberals who stood in their way. In many sectors of this conversation, Nietzschean ideals of unencumbered Strongmen merrily making mincemeat of the slave morality of the Marxist masses are enthusiastically peddled by courageous souls hiding behind pseudonyms.

The appeal of all this can be thoroughly baffling at first glance, but if my analysis here holds, it begins to make a lot more sense. It is, after all, human nature to seek for every action an equal and opposite reaction. If political authority today suffers from a shortfall of masculine courage, then the natural temptation is to seek the remedy in an almost cartoonish hyper-masculinity. Unfortunately, there is a reason that the advocates of such a Strongman find themselves reaching into the deep pagan past for exemplars—indeed, Nietzsche himself insisted this was the only place one could look, for Christianity had made that kind of libidinous, domineering, unreasoning masculinity unthinkable.

Even before Christianity, though, Aristotle was emphatic that courage existed as a mean between extremes. The maximum of courage, in other words, was not courage at all, but mere rashness. Courage had to be tempered by reason, which is to say, guided by the form and measure of all the virtues, "prudence." Prudence is the crowning virtue of political leadership because it represents the courageous ideal of political authority shaped by constant attention to epistemic authority. Our word prudence comes from the Latin word *providentia*—which means both "seeing ahead" and "planning ahead"—bringing to bear as much expert counsel as possible to predict the future, but then, on the basis of this, taking initiative so as to boldly shape that future. The biblical virtue of wisdom, which I take to be largely synonymous with prudence (although somewhat broader) is also the paradigmatic virtue of kingship, as the book of Proverbs attests. It is a virtue exercised by kings precisely through leaning upon (though not abdicating to) epistemic authorities: "For by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory" (Prov. 15:22). An *abundance* of counselors—note. Experts tend to each have their own unique fields of expertise, gained by a lifetime of studied attention to one slice of created reality. They must share that knowledge with the leaders who make decisions, but realize that they do not necessarily have the full view. The leader must

be able to synthesize these fragments into a holistic vision of the common good, and act courageously in pursuit of it, knowing that he will likely have naysayers chattering behind his back because they think he is giving short shrift to their own particular slice of concern.

VII. RENEWING OUR POLITICAL IMAGINATIONS

This virtue of prudently courageous leadership is not one easily acquired—indeed, like all of the virtues but perhaps even more so, it can only be truly acquired by example. But where do we look for examples, in a world so long starved of authentic political leadership? Politics is an imaginative enterprise, and we find ourselves today with our imaginations malformed by generations of leaders cross-dressing in lab coats or exhorting us to "just do what feels right." Consequently, on the rare occasion when a genuine servant-leader combines competence, confidence, and humility, the left derides him as a manifestation of fascistic toxic masculinity while the right pillories him as a namby-pamby compromiser.

The urgently needed reformation of our imaginations, then, and the furnishing of exemplars to follow, must begin in arenas less polarized than national politics. Thankfully, other realms of life exist, although national politics increasingly colonizes them. State politics, local politics, schools, churches, local businesses, and community sports teams: In these grassroots environments, the necessity of authentic authority, and hunger at its absence, is deeply felt. Even in a role as humble as that of little-league coach, a leader must make difficult decisions, in the midst of uncertainty, between incommensurable goods, and then compel obedience to them. This requires wisdom, courage,

and charisma, in defiance of the ascendant culture of offense-taking and risk management.

We can find in these little platoons not merely schools of virtue, but schools of authority—places where aspiring leaders can learn anew how to act as authorities, and where the rest of us can learn anew how to *recognize* the phenomenon of authority. If we struggle to discern true political authority within the sphere of politics, then let us call on religious leaders, school principals, coaches, and businessmen to model it in their own local contexts—and let's cut them some slack when they inevitably fail. Only by doing so can we retrain our imaginations to see and our affections to respond to an authority that transcends mere expertise.

BRAD LITTLEJOHN (PH.D., UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH) IS A FELLOW IN THE EVANGELICALS AND CIVIC LIFE PROGRAM AT THE ETHICS AND PUBLIC POLICY CENTER AND FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT EMERITUS OF THE DAVENANT INSTITUTE. HE LIVES IN NORTHERN VIRGINIA WITH HIS WIFE AND FOUR CHILDREN.

DISNEY'S WISH: AN INVERTED GENIE STORY
NOT ALADDIN, BUT PROMETHEUS

ROSS BYRD

Let me say from the start…when it comes to Disney movies, I am a true believer. I grew up on Disney stories as much as—no, probably more—than Bible stories. They shaped me. And yes, I will admit I'm a bit nostalgic for the days of *Beauty and the Beast*, if for the music alone. But when I watch a new Disney film, I don't come cynical. I come rooting for it. I want my kids to have the same experiences I had as a kid. I don't want to leave thinking about the conversations I now have to have with them about a certain problematic theme: "So kids, are we sure it's good and noble to sacrifice all history, tradition, family, and heritage for the glory of your secret sacred self?" or "Remember when those cute little woodland creatures were all joyfully singing, 'We are our own origin story!'? Do you really think that's true?" (This actually happens in *Wish*; I'm not kidding.) But more on that later.

I want the story to resonate. I want my children to see the kinds of fairy tales they've grown up hearing and reading before bed. I want them to feel scared and yet brave, sad and yet inspired. I want them to experience a hero, an ordinary person not unlike my own sons and daughters, who is yet caught up in a much bigger world where things really matter, where courageous decisions can be made, even by children, and where love—especially self-sacrificial love—conquers all. This was generally the storyline of *Snow White, Robin Hood, Cinderella, Pinocchio, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, Little Mermaid*, and I'm sure plenty of others.

And that brings me to *Wish,* which was an interesting film, philosophically speaking.

THE PLOT

King Magnifico is a seemingly benevolent sorcerer who uncovers the power to grant wishes. He and his wife, Queen Amaya, found the kingdom of Rosas on an obscure island in the Mediterranean where people from all nations come to restart their lives and possibly have their wishes granted. The key word being…*possibly*. The cost of joining the island kingdom is that they must give up their heart's greatest wish to the king on their eighteenth birthday in a ceremony which involves the wish being extracted and given to the king as a floating blue sphere of light. In the same ceremony, the person's memory of the wish is completely erased. And if you're thinking, "This sounds like a bad idea," you're actually the only one, because the people of Rosas are unequivocally stoked about the whole thing: "Forget without regret!" Anyway, the king keeps these blue spheres "safe" in the highest tower of his castle, which is where our protagonist enters the picture.

Asha, a teenaged girl from Rosas, is granted access to this tower during a job interview for a position as the king's apprentice. There she beholds the countless wishes of the kingdom which haven't been granted, and in particular, the very innocent wish of her 100-year-old grandfather. Why, she wonders, have such wishes not been granted? Naturally, she asks the king if he would consider granting her fading grandfather's wish. "Today is his 100th birthday." The king says no. In fact, he cannot grant the vast majority of wishes, because even the seemingly best wishes could be "unsafe" if used in the wrong way. He's just trying to keep everyone safe. Asha pushes back. How could this be? The people of Rosas are good people with good wishes! The king is flummoxed by her disrespect. But apparently he's not evil (at this point). So he lets her go. That night, Asha, feeling shocked and betrayed, goes on a Pocahontas-style jaunt through the forest in search of the meaning of it all, and ends up making her own wish upon a star. To her surprise, the star responds and descends as a cute little baby star, which brings a momentary burst of light and joy to the whole kingdom, while also transforming most of the creatures of the forest into talking, singing, dancing beings.

After this unusual burst of light, the king perceives that another source of wish-granting may be afoot. So, against his kind wife's urging, he resorts to darker magic. Meanwhile, Asha has found a way to smuggle herself into the high tower of the king and steal her grandfather's wish back. She succeeds and returns the wish to her meek grandfather who had urged her not to do it, but is thankful when he gets it back. Back in the tower, the king realizes, by means of a forbidden spell book, that he can use the wishes of the kingdom to gain power for himself. Thus the king is transformed into a powerful, evil sorcerer. Asha then formulates a plan to steal and restore everyone's wishes from the tower of the evil king. But her plan fails. He's too powerful. That's okay, Asha hopes, because they have the magic of the little star. But now he's stolen the baby star. That's okay, she says, they can wish on other stars. But then he clouded the sky with his magic. At last, Asha finds the solution:

we're all made of stardust. We *are* stars. (We are our own origin story, remember?) So, at Asha's urging, they make one collective wish from within their true selves to overcome the sorcerer, and…

You get the picture.

In fairness, the plot is inventive and not as formulaic as perhaps I'm making it sound. But in a strange way, that's its greatest weakness. For decades, what made Disney fairytale movies so powerful was precisely the fact that they were intentionally conveying stories that were far older than their writers, directors and audiences, stories which had been told and tested over hundreds of years, sometimes even longer. *Wish*, on the other hand, is a story for our time, for better or worse, but mostly for worse. Don't get me wrong. I did not feel like my kids were being made victims of super-cynical woke messaging. If anything, *Wish* felt more like a return to early 2000s optimistic multicultural expressive individualism, as though the Disney powers-that-be had had a heart-to-heart after a couple of commercial busts and figured they'd dial this one back a bit. But it's funny how, when you kick the progressive activists out and just try to make something that will "please all audiences"—*and* you have no traditional story to fall back on, just a bottom line that needs to be fed by organic demand—you might just end up revealing what the actual underlying philosophy of our moment looks like. *And* that philosophy may not be as new as we suppose.

Wish, a movie about granting wishes, is a genie story. But not the one you think. *Wish* is an inverted genie story. The philosophy of our moment is an inverted genie story: not *Aladdin*, but *Prometheus*.

THE GENIE STORY ARC: TRICKING THE TRICKSTER

You know the genie-and-the-wish trope. It's one of the most recognizable patterns in storytelling. A character comes across some mystical being who can grant wishes. "I can wish whatever I want and it will be granted?"

"Yes," says the genie.

"I'm in," says the human.

But there's always a catch. Be careful what you wish for, etc. What begins as, "I'm instantly rich and happy!" quickly becomes, "I've never been so poor and miserable." (By the way, if you've ever looked into the long ugly history of lottery winners in our country, you begin to realize why these ancient stories have stood the test of time.) The word "genie" is an Englishization of the Arabic word "jinn," which is a kind of spiritual being much like a fairy or a daemon. These are low-level spirits who boast the power to grant wishes to their "master," but usually, they also have their own agenda. Despite the claim of Robin Williams' superb song, "Friend Like Me" in Disney's *Aladdin*, genies and fairies and the like are not concierge-style wish-fulfillers who only want to make their masters happy. They're usually up to something. They may call you "master" in the moment, but the very reason they deal in wishes is because they know there's no better way to enslave a human being than through his or her own desires.

We see this in many European fairy tales. Sometimes

an explicit bargain is made between the spirit and the human, as in Rumpelstiltskin or Faust. Sometimes the tradeoffs are more implicit or concealed. *One Thousand And One Nights* catalogs a number of such stories from further East, including the Aladdin story. You can also find the pattern in Greek mythology. For instance, the greedy King Midas is granted one wish from the god Dionysus after doing him a favor. He asks that everything he touches would turn to gold. He gets his wish and soon discovers his error: He nearly starves to death and turns his beloved daughter into a golden statue. Finally he begs for mercy and Dionysus acquiesces. Interestingly, to reverse the spell, he must wash in the river Pactolus, which brings to mind some parallels with the story of Elisha and Naaman, who must put aside his pride and wash in the river Jordan to remove his leprosy.

The point is, when it comes to genies and fairies and gnomes granting wishes, user beware. Dealings with these beings are rarely what they seem; more like dealing with a demon than an angel. In genie stories, it's not the most high God granting your wish, nor an angel, nor even Zeus or a high king or a high-level principle (e.g. Disney's "wishing on a star"— we'll get to that). Again, genies are low-level spirits. They literally come from low places and confined spaces. Rumpelstiltskin is a little man who enters the room through a hole in the wall. Genies come from lamps which are hidden underground, in caves, or underwater. They want to be "let out." They're not all-powerful and they're not always entirely evil. But they usually *are* tricksters. And the power of their trick lies in a particular kind of straightforwardness:

They will give you what you wish for, quite directly. But getting what you wish is the trick. They use your desires against you. And that's what enslaves you.

There's a deeply Christian truth hidden in the genie story arc, and it's something like this: Beware the spirits which propose quick, straight lines between your deepest desires and getting them. The genie's offer or bargain or "gift"—however it presents itself— has a hidden cost to the wisher. Thus, the hero of the genie story is almost never the genie. The hero of the genie story is the man or woman who is able to see beyond the allure of the genie's magic by way of some higher principle.

In the case of Rumpelstiltskin, the girl gains her freedom in the end by tricking the trickster. By solving the mystery of the little man's name (discerning his identity), she rises above the little game of wishes he was trying to play with her, and she wins. In the tale of King Midas, the king is not exactly a hero, but he does gain freedom from his curse by humbling himself, repenting of his wish, and accepting a more patient form of mediation between desire and consummation (e.g. washing in the river, appreciating the value of his daughter over the value of gold, etc). In humility, he is exalted. Impressively, Disney's *Aladdin* actually does both of these and more. When Aladdin sacrifices his final wish for the good of the genie, he manages not only to transform and free himself but also to transform and free the genie. Genius. (No pun intended—the word "genius" is related to the word "genie").

That's the genie story arc.

JESUS & THE GENIE IN THE WILDERNESS

In light of this pattern, we can now propose that something like the first genie story occurred in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve were tricked by a low spirit in the Garden to take what they desired and were cursed for doing so. But that version is incomplete. Adam and Eve do not become the heroes of their story. For their redemption, we have to wait for another genie story—perhaps the grand finale of all genie stories—in the pages of the New Testament in Matthew Chapter 4.

> *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and promised to grant him three wishes…*

Okay, fine. The text doesn't say, "promised to grant him three wishes." But that *is* what happens…and in a Middle Eastern desert no less! Of course, the tempter does not need to ask Jesus his wishes. He's no second-rate genie. He already knows. The devil's temptations are "tempting" precisely because they approximate Jesus's own desires: to end his hunger, to reveal his true nature, and to save and rule the world. Are these things bad? Of course not. So why do we call them temptations? For two reasons: (1) the means by which they're being offered, and (2) the one through whom they're offered. This fallen spirit of the wilderness—the same spirit who spoke to Eve in the garden through the mouth of a serpent— offers Jesus a straight-line path to fulfilling his good purposes, rather than trusting in the more patient

and mysterious mediation of the Father's plan. Sound familiar? In the desert, Jesus retreads the story of our ancestors in the garden, reminding us that the forbidden fruit was not forbidden because it was bad. Rather, it was forbidden because it was *good.* So good that it had to be approached properly—in right relationship to the Father. And how does Jesus deal with the genie's offers? He denies them by humbling himself according to the highest principle of all, the will of the Father. But that's not all. He also tricks the trickster by leveraging—rather than merely denying or negating—the power of Satan, in order to bring about the will of the Father in the end. But for that, you have to read all the way to the end of the Gospels.

PROMETHEUS: HERO OR VILLAIN?

Now we are ready to consider Disney's *Wish,* which, as I have said, is an inverted version of this pattern.

In ancient mythology, the best example of an inverted genie story is the Greek myth Prometheus. Prometheus is a Titan to whom Zeus gives the privilege of shaping human beings out of clay. Prometheus's love for humans eventually trumps his love for the gods. Even though the gods presumably provide for human beings, Prometheus eventually views the relationship between humans and the gods as zero-sum. Humans are better off ruling themselves, he thinks. So, one day, when Zeus is expecting a sacrifice from men, Prometheus tricks Zeus by offering the bones of the sacrifice disguised as the best meat, reserving the actual best portion of the animal for humans. For this improper and deceitful sacrifice, Zeus removes fire from the earth.

So, on behalf of the human race, Prometheus scales Olympus and steals the fire of the gods, which humans then use not only to cook their food but also to forge metal weapons and other technologies which were previously available only to the gods. For this betrayal, Zeus punishes Prometheus for eternity by tying him to a cliffside and having eagles come each day to eat his regrown liver. And yet, Prometheus's gift echoes through the ages. After all, are we not now even more powerful than the gods?

This question, which the story of Prometheus raises, is the subject of two of the most famous books of the early 19th Century, two books which were published two years apart, by members of the same household. In 1818, Mary Shelley published, *The Modern Prometheus*, which she had begun just a couple years prior at the age of eighteen. That book is now known by its more popular title, *Frankenstein*. *Frankenstein* is the tragic tale of a man who, by way of great technological advances, gives life to his own version of a human being and suffers the dreadful consequences for his actions. Her more famous husband Percy Bysshe Shelley had begun a poetic work a few years prior entitled *Prometheus Unbound*. Percy's work, though not published until two years after Mary's, is generally a much more positive take on the Titan who stole fire from the gods. Modern humanity, as he envisions it, has been shaped much more in the image of Prometheus than the God of the Bible.

In retrospect, Mary's work has become perhaps the unexpected champion of the two. You can hardly graduate high school without being assigned *Frankenstein* at some point along the way. And yet, as a culture, we seem overwhelmingly to have chosen the side of Percy. Indeed, it's hard for us *not* to think of Prometheus as the sacrificial hero of the human race, just as the Greeks did.

But that's not the way ancient Christians saw him.

The Promethean story also has biblical parallels, yet with stories which are not so heroic as their Greek counterpart. First, Prometheus parallels the story of the Fall in Genesis 3, which we have already mentioned. But to put it in more Promethean terms, humanity is convinced by a rebellious spirit to steal the gift of knowledge off of a divinely forbidden tree rather than trusting and waiting for it. In so doing, the relationship between heaven and earth is broken, humans are cursed, and chaos ensues. (Yet, notice, they *do* keep the knowledge they took. There's no putting the fruit back on the tree.)

But another story of another "fall" comes next, which parallels the Promethean details even more closely. In this story, Adam and Eve's sons Cain and Abel offer separate sacrifices to God. God receives Abel's sacrifice but rejects Cain's sacrifice as unworthy (probably because, as tradition holds, Cain withheld the best parts for himself). This should sound familiar. In response, Cain kills his brother Abel out of envy. God then exiles Cain even farther from the garden and puts a special mark on him, a double-edged mercy-judgment, which both protects and shames him. Interestingly, Cain's offspring become the first metal workers, weapons makers, and city-builders, using these god-like inventions to protect and supplement themselves in a world where murder

now exists. In summary, first they steal knowledge, then they steal power. This then leads to further falls, as we see in the story of the Flood and the Tower of Babel later in the pages of Genesis.

In the end, both Genesis and Prometheus depict a world in which humans are persuaded into seeing their relationship with God (or the gods) as zero-sum. Thus they become prone to stealing what they could have waited for, withholding their best sacrifices, and using supplemental "technologies" (the fruit, fig leaves, weapons, and cities—or fire!) to become *like* gods without having to enter into a trusting relationship *with* God. The details differ, of course, but the pattern is much the same. The main difference between the two stories is the perspective.

The greatest difference between the oldest Bible stories and the oldest pagan myths is not merely that the Bible stories *happened* and the pagan myths *did not*. Many of the greatest pagan myths describe true realities, sometimes even real-life events (e.g. Gilgamesh and the other flood narratives). Oftentimes these parallel accounts hover around the same central phenomenon. The main difference is, in pagan myths, the story is told by an unreliable narrator.

Imagine two cultures witness the same world-altering event. Both cultures experience the same phenomena, but because they prioritize different things, hold different values, and worship different gods, they see the same reality through entirely different lenses. If the event is a war, for instance, they might disagree about what constitutes courage and wisdom. They might even disagree about who

were the good guys and who were the bad guys, or even about who won and who lost. For this reason, the stories may appear quite different in the end, even though they are dealing with overlapping realities.

In this light, Prometheus can actually be seen as a retelling of the Fall of Man. Except, through Greek eyes, it wasn't a Fall at all. It was humanity's Rise. Imagine your culture's stories have never mentioned a good Creator/Father/King like the God of the Bible who made and loved the world, a God of gods who is working all things for good, etc. Imagine, instead, that your stories depicted greedy and capricious deities in the heavens ruled by Zeus, who was himself the most greedy and capricious of them all. Then, of course, you would long for a Prometheus to set you free from the untrustworthy whims of the gods, to make you great, perhaps even greater than they.

This is the story of Prometheus. It is also the story of Babel. And in many ways, it is the myth of our modern world.

In recent years, thanks to certain technological, political, and philosophical revolutions, we have almost unknowingly begun to trade the Christian view of the heavens for a pagan view. At the same time, the faint warnings of *Frankenstein* have given way to modern promises of *Prometheus Unbound*. This is where the symbolism of *Wish* begins to reveal the philosophy of our moment.

Who is God, we are tempted to think, but an ambivalent deity who blesses and curses according

to his own whims, who withholds from one what he gives to another without discernible reason or cause? In the past, what could men do but worship this God of Heaven who gives life and death as he sees fit? But now we live in a new world of knowledge, technology, freedom, and individual rights. The fire is ours. Our knowledge and power work better than his ever did. We used to pray. Now we go to the doctor. Better yet, we ask the internet, by way of Google or ChatGPT. Modern man asks no favors of Yahweh and makes no sacrifices to him. We make our own bargains with reality. We make our own gods. And our gods are making us great. The problem of divine withholding has been overcome. We choose. We demand. We receive.

Even the familiar cry, "Down with the patriarchy!" fits well into this worldview. At first glance, of course, it seems to be no more than a commentary about gender roles. But it's deeper than we realize. The word *patriarch* has to do with fatherhood. In other words, the question we're beginning to ask ourselves—and which the movie *Wish* forces us to ask quite directly—is this: Why would we want a Father in the heavens when we can have a genie in our pocket? After all, the genie always, immediately gives what we want as soon as we ask. (Note that the word *immediate* literally means 'without mediation'.)

In response to this, of course, the traditional genie stories would warn, "Beware. The genies may be granting wishes now, but their own agendas will come to light sooner than later. It's tempting to trust low-level wish-granters, but in order to win in the end, you have to appeal to something higher."

But *Wish* is not a traditional genie story. *Wish* is an inverted genie story. Not *Aladdin*, but *Prometheus*, a startling reflection of the philosophy of our internet-algorithm-centric moment. After all, what is an algorithm but a genie that gives us whatever we wish *immediately* from an infinite bank of unearned knowledge and power?

Ultimately, what we get in Disney's *Wish* is a pagan myth modernized. Or, you might say, a version of the Christian story paganized. *Wish* depicts a true pattern, except…it's told by an unreliable narrator who mistakes the bad guys for good guys and defeat for victory.

The truth is that we *do* have a King who has established a new kingdom. He *has* invited all to enter in. And he *has* said to us, "Ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you." And, yes, there *is* a catch. It's not exactly that we must "forget" our wish as soon as we give it to him, as in the Disney version. Our King puts it this way, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you." But, honestly, is that better or worse than Disney's version? Again, it depends on your perspective.

Abiding in the king and letting his words abide in us could be conceived as such a palpable and demanding form of allegiance as to be much worse than forgetting. "You may have your wish as long as you commit your heart fully to me and allow my thoughts to live in you." Yikes. From a certain perspective, Jesus is a worse tyrant than King Magnifico. Now add to that the fact that many of his greatest servants have not seen their requests directly

answered. Some are still waiting. Some die waiting (e.g. Hebrews 11).

Whether by King Magnifico or King Jesus, the writers of *Wish* see no reason our wishes should be mediated by any higher authority than ourselves. "So we can ask for whatever we wish," they seem to say, "but we're supposed to trust *him* to be the arbitrator of our wishes, to judge how and when and in what way to grant the desires of our hearts? No. Such a king cannot be trusted. He is too high and out of reach. Even a star, in fact, is too high and out of reach. We need a low-level spirit, a rebellious spirit who can steal what the high king will not immediately give. We need no king. We need no star above. We are our own origin story."

In this way, the teenaged Asha, the new modern Prometheus, becomes the hero of the story, climbing into the heavens to take from the king what is rightfully ours. Yet Disney's modern Prometheus does not come with the stark warnings of Frankenstein's monster. No, she comes as "Prometheus unbound," the good genie to replace the bad father. And thanks to her, we can be our own origin story.

"UNANSWERED PRAYERS" & THE LONG GAME

In 1991, Garth Brooks, probably my favorite country singer, had a number one hit called "Unanswered Prayers." It was apparently based on a true story, and it started out like this:

Just the other night at a hometown football game

My wife and I ran into my old high school flame
And as I introduced them, the past came back to me
And I couldn't help but think of the way things used to be
She was the one that I'd wanted for all times
And each night I'd spend prayin' that God would make her mine
And if He'd only grant me this wish I wished back then
I'd never ask for anything again

In short, having run into a woman he once loved, standing next to his wife, Brooks concludes that he is grateful *not* to have gotten what he wished. Here's the chorus:

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs
And just because He doesn't answer, doesn't mean He don't care
'Cause some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers

The point of the song, of course, is *not* that God doesn't answer prayer. It is that seemingly "unanswered prayers" are actually mediated by the Father for our good. If we wait and trust and keep praying, we will see that his ultimate *answer* is even better than we had hoped. It is a great gift, says theologian Garth Brooks, to have a divine mediator for our deepest desires.

But that was then (before the internet?), and this is now. Times have changed. Now, it seems to us almost unthinkable that someone, especially a loving God, would stand in the way of us getting what

we most deeply desire. For instance—forgive the highly charged example, but it fits—that a parent should stand in the way of a 14 year-old child having permanent "gender-affirming" surgery, which statistics show they may soon regret. But instead of trusting, abiding in their father and mother, such children will often (on the internet) seek out those spirits who promise to grant their wish without mediation. And will that be, for them, a blessing or a curse?

In the Old Testament, the low-level gods of the nations (aka demons) tend to give like genies. Your wish is their command, as long as you give them what they want in return. This is why the people of God are so often willing to run after false gods, even to the extent of being tempted to sacrifice their own children, as was the practice of neighboring tribes. Satan also provides straightforwardly. His promise to Eve in the Garden was true, and she got what she wanted quite directly. But that turned out to be a curse, not a blessing, in the end.

By contrast, God is playing the long game. And this fact can be quite frustrating for those in his camp. He is building a more patient kingdom, mediating our desires over time—even over generations—until they become one with his. His goal is not merely to give us what we want, but for us to become the kind of people who *want* the very best thing, which is him. This is why so much of the Old Testament is about waiting in exile and why, surprisingly, so much of the New Testament is about trusting God in the face of suffering and disappointment. That's right, even when the Messiah finally appears, he does not straightforwardly end the exile of his people.

He does not immediately establish a visible earthly kingdom, as was expected. Needless to say—or perhaps in our age it needs to be said!—this was a big disappointment for his disciples. It took them the whole of the Gospels and well into the Book of Acts to figure out that Jesus was playing a different game. "Can't he just be a genie for once? We've seen him feed five thousand. Let's make him king by force." But no, he disappears into the crowd, unwilling to take the straight-line path to the top.

We want the Promised Land without the wilderness first. To be branches untouched by the Father's pruning. To have fruit without roots. But that's not his way.

> *The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.* (Matthew 13:31-32)

And…

> *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* (John 12:24)

CONCLUSION: THE GENIE & THE GENIUS

The writers of *Wish* were right about one thing. The king and the wishing-star *are* too high and out of reach for us. Thankfully, especially each year at Advent and Christmastime, we are reminded that

we serve a king who came *down*. And when he did, he faced the same genie-like temptations as we, yet without sin. But Jesus did not only become for us the final hero of the genie story. He is also the final fulfillment of the inverted genie story. Jesus is the last and true Prometheus, the one who created us long ago, and then came down from heaven to be our advocate. Except, instead of rebelling against the Father on our behalf, he showed us what it meant to trust and obey Him. As the true and final mediator between God and man, Jesus brought the "wish" of the Father to his people and the "wish" of the people to the Father. And in the end, in the ultimate inversion, he let the great genie Satan have his way with him on the cross, only to reveal that Satan's final victory was also his eternal defeat. Just as Satan had used our desires against us, Jesus used Satan's desires against him. Whereas the first Adam was tricked, the second Adam tricked the trickster, and restored humanity to God.

It's almost as though Christ came into the world as the one who first redeems and then fulfills not just the Scriptures but every story—and every wish!— even the sorely mistaken ones, if only we trust him to do so. Our relationship to God in prayer is not that of a master to a genie. It's more like a madman to a genius. He comes to us, sits with us, and abides our ravings. Over time, as we learn to abide with him through the frustration of not immediately getting what we wish, he makes us sane again and, ultimately, gives us the desires of our hearts.

Thank you to Jonathan Pageau for inspiring much

of the symbolic thinking that went into this piece. Also thanks to a piece by Kathryn Wilson on "Rumpelstiltskin" a few years back, which has stuck in my mind ever since.

ROSS BYRD IS THE TEACHING DIRECTOR AT VIRGINIA BEACH FELLOWS AND THE OWNER AND DIRECTOR OF SURF HATTERAS, A SURFING CAMP FOR TEENS IN THE OUTER BANKS, NC. HE WAS RAISED IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND SERVED AS A LAY MINISTER AND MUSICIAN THERE FOR YEARS BEFORE A STINT AS ASSOCIATE PASTOR OF A NON-DENOMINATIONAL CHURCH. HE AND HIS WIFE HANNAH ARE RAISING FOUR SURFING CHILDREN. ROSS HAS DEGREES FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA (2005) AND REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY (2013). YOU CAN FOLLOW HIS WORK ON SUBSTACK AT WWW. PATIENTKINGDOM.COM.

Reformed

Civic Republicanism

JAKE MEADOR

We begin with a recent news report:

> *OMAHA, NE—In a candid plea addressed to the entire global community, Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert gave an impassioned speech Tuesday in which she announced that her city did not have the community spirit to withstand a terrorist attack. "The proud people of Omaha cannot and will not stand strong against terrorism," said the mayor, who stressed that if the Nebraska municipality were targeted by violence from any foreign or domestic militant organization, it would cave immediately. "Rest assured, no matter the scale of the attack, if this city's downtown or its government buildings are hit in a terrorist strike, our residents will not come together in the face of such tragedy. In fact, the moment we feel our lives are in danger, we will likely succumb to fear and distrust, turning upon our neighbors without mercy. And Omaha will never, ever heal as a community. Thank you."*

We laugh because of a grim recognition that there is some truth here, even if it is from *The Onion*. It's a long time since the early weeks of the pandemic when we optimistically thought it might bring us back together as a people. And when you consider not just COVID, but the many other factors that seem to have driven a stake into the heart of the American republic over the past ten years, you understand the joke all the better.

Unsurprisingly, such a time of uncertainty, fractured trust, and partisan anger has boiled over for some, such that they are now exploring alternative political visions for the future of this nation. I want to highlight three rival visions that are seemingly well-represented and well-established before suggesting a final one that has received

less public support but is, I think, a far superior alternative.

Before we get to those alternative visions, however, we should define the order that has marked recent decades in American public life. The British philosopher John Gray has spoken of "two faces" of liberalism. By that he means one iteration of liberalism which says 'liberal rights are important because there is no one best way to live and therefore we need liberal rights to protect everyone's right to find their own path.' The second face of liberalism says 'liberal rights are important because a liberal life is the best life to live and therefore we can't actually live well without liberal rights.' The post-war United States, what political theorist Michael Lind would see as the "third republic" of the US, stretching from the resolution of World War II through to the early 21st century, is in many ways exemplifying Gray's first face of liberalism, for better and worse.

It did so to the good in that it preserved liberal rights domestically through the Cold War at a time when much of the world lacked those rights which we regard as so basic. Indeed, via the Civil Rights Act, it actually was able to help strengthen and further secure those rights domestically. Yet there were also breakdowns. The particular shape that this era's liberalism took was often one of anti interventionism in domestic affairs, which meant that government did not see its business as including the protection of the unborn, for instance, or the preservation of marriage, or the protection of American workers from predatory firms.

The result of this anti-interventionist posture was two-fold, I think. First, American common life atrophied badly—manifesting today in soaring rates of reported loneliness as well as the much discussed deaths of despair. You can also see it in falling birth rates, the decline of marriage, and the ascent of the gig economy, which further accelerates the attacks on American workers—now not only do American workers struggle to organize themselves, they often even struggle to secure the legal status of an "employee." What is most striking, perhaps, is that the anti-interventionist posture has not actually worked to keep government from intervening in common life; it has merely worked to keep government from being a pro-active member in the commonwealth. But the various layered crises created by anti-interventionism have actually led to a dramatically expanded state because the state is forced to jump in to patch up the rips and tears in the fabric of our common life. So on both of these levels, the anti interventionist style of liberalism has failed quite dramatically, I think.

This, then, is why we are seeing alternative visions emerging.

Option 1: Retrenched Anti-Interventionism: This vision effectively says, "Yes yes, there are problems in our nation, but if you look more closely, it's not as bad as you think. So we need to stick to the quasi-libertarian or liberaltarian conception of the government because it's not as bad as you think and any alternative will be worse." It holds that the cost of a more active or 'interventionist' government is too high. Declining birth rates and the breakdown of the family and the loss of solidarity across society are just the price of freedom.

Option 2: The successor ideology: This is Wes Yang's term for the social progressivism that has swept the American left in the past ten and, especially, the past five years, often to the detriment of other forms of leftist politics. One way of understanding this particular strain of progressivism would be to say that it's a kind of development of the specific post-war strain of Gray's Liberalism 1 into Liberalism 2. It's a somewhat contradictory impulse, but you might render it as "the Liberal life is the best life to live because it secures for each person the right to define their own best life." Thus the sometimes bizarre relationship of the successor ideology to liberalism—at once a seemingly far more radical form of liberalism and, simultaneously, a repudiation of wide swathes of the liberal tradition. The illiberalism of this stream is perhaps best seen in the examples of Brandon Eich, a former CEO who lost his job at Firefox over a political donation to the Proposition 8 campaign in California, or Jennifer Sey, a former executive at Levi's who says she left the company due to internal pressures she faced over sharing her views on school shutdowns during the pandemic. There are many other examples of this we might cite, of course.

I do not think Christians can adopt this strategy for a couple reasons. First, the sexual politics of the successor ideology are categorically at odds with historic Christian thinking about sexuality. A political vision that regards the design of one's body as disclosing nothing whatsoever about one's sexuality

is not a recognizably Christian vision. Second, I worry that the entrenched liberationist posture of the successor ideology goes beyond a desire to simply liberate certain oppressed peoples and to use political means to do so—this is an utterly unremarkable thing in the Christian tradition, particularly in modern Christian thought, after all—and moves into a vision of the world that regards certain conflicts as being intrinsic to the world's design. To take only one recent example, an *Atlantic* reviewer recently flagged a new book called *This American Ex-Wife* by Iowa journalist Lyz Lenz. Writing about the book, reviewer Lily Meier says,

> *"On the page, at least, Lenz never entertains the idea that marriage could change for the better. Nor does she imagine a radical alternative—say, a society in which marriage does not exist. Instead, she turns, over and over, to individual women's decisions to leave their marriage, which she invariably presents as a brave, necessary, and—yes—inspirational choice. Early in the book, Lenz writes archly, "I'm not arguing that you personally should get a divorce. I mean, not necessarily." She then goes on to suggest, repeatedly, that you should."*

Later on, Meier continues,

> *Although This American Ex-Wife contains sweet cameos by male friends who encourage Lenz to put her own happiness first, its most substantial*

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[1] Kanneh, Lamin. T*ranslating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Orbis, New York; 1989); https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2022/05/justin-lee-on-fundamentalism-and-evangelicalism

male perspective is that of the chorus of angry men who comment on and reply to Lenz's work online. Being harassed by internet misogynists is a miserable experience, one that Lenz, whose newsletter is called Men Yell at Me, has reclaimed as a personal brand. In a recent interview, Lenz mentioned wanting to put men "on blast and on notice" with her book. Even if that's the case, she shows remarkably little patience for divorced women who hope to get married again. Instead of making space for complexity, Lenz appears to train her eyes on the set destination of a repaired life. For her, this repair means being single. A "better thing [than marriage] did exist," she writes, "and it was me."

This assumed ontological violence is inherently corrosive of common life because it can't not be. And for Christians who believe that God made a peaceable world shaped and defined by a peaceable order and that he calls us as Christians to live peaceable lives together, at times even partly restoring the natural order of the world through his aid, any political vision that presupposes violence between people is, I think, a non-starter.

So the third ideology: Post-Liberal Christian political visions. The two most dominant strains here are the Catholic Integralism of Adrian Vermeule and the Christian Nationalism of Stephen Wolfe, Andrew Isker, and their colleagues. (Please note that I'm using the term 'Christian Nationalism' in the particular

way it is meant by Wolfe and Isker, authors of the two bestselling books advocating for the movement. I am not using it in the way many in the media have, which is to say 'non-libertarian socially conservative Christians.' I am using the term to mean what its most enthusiastic supporters mean by it and not what its often quite ignorant critics mean.) The thread that links these two quite different groups together is that they have effectively given up on the possibility of liberal democracy as a governing philosophy.

Instead, they favor "integration from within" in Vermeule's phrase—by which he basically means accomplishing Roman integralism via a seizing of the apparatus of the state. Or they favor a turn toward a more traditional strong man style of political engagement with relatively minimal protection for traditional liberal rights—thus Wolfe's call for a "Christian prince." Here is how Wolfe describes that 'prince':

> *"He is the first of his people—one whom the people can look upon as father or protectorate of the country. I am not calling for a monarchical regime over every civil polity, and certainly not an autocracy, though I envision a measured and theocratic Caesarism—the prince as a world-shaker for our time, who brings a Christian people to self-consciousness and who, in his rise, restores their will for their good. 'Prince' is a fitting title for a man of dignity and greatness of soul who will lead a people to liberty, virtue, and godliness—to*

greatness."

Alongside this call for a strong man figure to lead has often come a willingness to embrace old interwar European right style politics, including endorsing Francisco Franco of Spain as a model and suggesting that it may be necessary to constrain the freedoms of some ethnic groups in order to secure civic peace.

These are the options I do not want us to pursue. So now, with that ground cleared, I hope to do two things: First, to articulate one core theme that runs through much of the Reformed tradition, dating back to its earliest sources, and then second to articulate how this theme might function within a renewed American democracy.

First, I want to draw your attention to the work of Martin Bucer, a 16th century reformer from the south German city of Strasbourg. Bucer is a now sadly neglected figure in the early Reformation so it is likely you have not heard of him.

A brief history, then, to start: Bucer was a Dominican monk living in Heidelberg in the late 1510s when a renegade Augustinian monk from Wittenberg came to the city to hold a public disputation with one of Bucer's fellow Dominicans, John Eck. Bucer attended that disputation and came away with a somewhat surprising conclusion: Luther was right. This was the debate when Eck told Luther "look, everything you're saying about the authority of the church and its relationship to Scripture is there in Jan Hus," and Luther shocked everyone by saying, "Yes, Hus was right." As he rapidly became convinced of the

necessity of drastic church reform, Bucer also became disenchanted with the Dominican order and secured a release from his vows only weeks before the pope stopped granting any such releases. Indeed, a letter from Bucer's superior advising against Bucer's release was in route to the pope only just behind Bucer's own request to be released. In a different technological moment when information moved more quickly, Bucer might have been denied his release, given a trial, and made to recant or face coercive punishment. As it was, he was released from his vows and left the order. Not long after that, he met a runaway nun named Elisabeth Silberheisen and they were soon married.

Now, for context: They married in the early 1520s. Martin Luther married a runaway nun as well of course, the more famous Katharine von Bora, in the late 1520s. It was an act seen as an impious blasphemy by the church, but also somewhat less shocking by then because it was so common and also much less dangerous for Luther because of the protection of Frederick the Wise, his local ruler. Bucer made this step far earlier and without the protection of a lord. And it made him positively radioactive anywhere he might go in the Holy Roman Empire.

Anywhere, that is, except the city of Strasbourg. Strasbourg was a merchant center of the day as well as a publishing hub and it was largely self-governing, provided they didn't push their limits too much with the Holy Roman Empire. And so the city had actually adopted quite radical laws of religious toleration. That fact combined with the fact that Bucer's grandfather was a citizen of the city made it an obvious destination

for him. And so he and Elisabeth arrived in 1523, fearing that Strasbourg was their last chance to find a quiet home together. Fortunately for us all, the city received him. I tell this history to make the point that the earliest days of the Reformation advance in the way they do partly because of what were, by the standards of the day, extremely liberal ideas about toleration in one particular German city.

Once he is established in the city, Bucer begins to work and quickly establishes himself as a leader in the city. He had an interesting blend of pietism and a deep concern with Christian love that joined up with his Dominican training as a theologian in very promising ways. He is also uniquely instructive for us here because if Luther's chief preoccupation was how a sinner can stand justified before God, Bucer's chief preoccupation was how Christians can live lives of love with one another and within broader society. His first great work is titled simply *Instructions in Christian Love*, his most well-known mid-career work is *On the True Care of Souls* and is a pastoral manual of sorts, and his final work, published just before his death, was *De Regno Christi*, which is a letter to King Edward VI of England instructing him on how to lead a Christian society as a Christian monarch, specifically on how the monarch can use his power to guide people toward godliness. For our purposes, I want to focus on his first work, however. *Instructions in Christian Love* is an immensely practical work that does precisely what its title suggests. I want to share one passage from it, however, that is especially important for explaining the underlying imagination of Bucer:

"*All other creatures exist, indeed, not for themselves. With all they are, possess, and can do they serve God in doing good to all other creatures according to their nature and order. The sky moves and shines not for itself but for all other creatures. Likewise the earth produces not for itself but for all other created things. Similarly all the plants and all the animals, by what they are, have, can and actually do, are directed toward usefulness and helpfulness to other creatures and especially to man.*"

The natural state of things, then, is marked by care and generosity. It is important to understand this because it is a fundamentally different sort of vision for the world from that of later moderns, who tend, following Darwin, to view nature as "red in tooth and claw" and to view the natural world as being governed by the survival of the fittest. Nature is about domination for moderns, but for Bucer nature is actually marked by the ways in which creatures and even something like the Sun and weather patterns are all ordered toward the health of another. In this there is perhaps an echo of St Paul who in his attempts to explain the grace of God would himself appeal to the facts of rain and sunshine and how they support the life of the world. You might even say that for Bucer there is an anti-domination assumption at the foundation of his politics.

So what sets humanity apart? For Bucer it is that we possess the capacity to choose to give ourselves to others rather than merely doing so without thought:

Only man is created after the image of God in

order that he may understand and also choose spiritual things, and thereby grasp, follow, and fulfill the will of God. He requires us to desire to further the profit and salvation of all. Hence, before all creation, man must so direct his being that in all his doings he seeks not his own, but only the welfare of his neighbors and brethren for the honor of God. Thereby man will also use well and rightly all other creatures and blessedly rule them for their own welfare and proper honor.

The rest of Bucer's thought all flows naturally from this foundation. Reality itself is marked not by battles for domination between primordial enemies locked in a world defined by ontological violence. Rather, reality itself, being made by a God of love, is defined by the ways in which one created thing gives of itself to another with all of reality being woven together into a complex web of giving and receiving. (It is perhaps noting how the modern study of complex ecosystems lends some strong support to Bucer's vision of the created order.)

I want to suggest briefly here that you might find in this thought of Bucer's a foreshadowing of later developments in reformed thought. Writing in his *Politica*, about 70 years after Bucer's death, the great reformed theorist Johannes Althusius argues that politics is essentially the art of structuring our necessary social relationships so that they are mutually beneficial and delightful.

If we were to link him up to Bucer, you might even say that politics is a way of making our relationships with one another more natural, provided we understand

nature correctly. In a world where many of our peers act is if the world is fundamentally violent and unsafe, human relationships are fundamentally dangerous, and life together comes with inherent limitations to your sacred rights, the core conviction at the heart of the Calvinist tradition is a badly needed idea for our day: We are not made for ourselves, but for others. This is not dangerous because it is how the entire creation is made. And the gift God gives each of us is the ability to choose this path of care and self-giving whereas the rest of creation simply enacts it unthinkingly. This, incidentally, is why Bucer thinks, *contra* the Anabaptist tradition, that a Christian society necessarily follows from the call to practice Christian love, for what is Christian society but simply the broad acting out of this natural call to self-giving that God gives to all people?

Now, you likely are wondering how some of this maps onto our context today. We do not have Christian monarchs presiding over Christian societies seeking out the advice of theologians as to how they would execute their office. Rather, we have a world drenched in difference to a degree that even a son of Strasbourg could never have imagined. So what then? In closing I want to turn to the vision of liberal democracy put forward by the Princeton religion scholar Jeffrey Stout, who is himself both a leftist and an atheist, but has deep regard for the place of religion in democratic life. Writing in his book *Democracy and Tradition* Stout protests against the anti-interventionist vision of post-war liberalism, arguing that it defined the terms of public debate in ways inherently alienating to religious believers and, therefore, corrosive of public trust between people of

faith and secular people.

In particular, Stout takes aim at the assumption that valid public arguments are only those arguments built on presuppositions shared by everyone in a society. Indeed, he presses the point harder by noting that such a rule for publicly admissible speech regarding public life would actually render both Lincoln's second inaugural and Martin Luther King Jr.'s many orations as invalid, since both made arguments about the shaping of public life on specifically theistic and even specifically Christian grounds. A definition of democratic speech that excludes both Lincoln and King is, Stout argues, not a definition we should want any part of. What's more, defining the 'rules' of public life in such a way that religious believers are not allowed to bring all of themselves into public life will, he warns, lead to many religious believers abandoning liberal democracy altogether. If the rulebook is defined in a way that excludes them, he suggests, they will listen and soon begin opting out themselves. It is in this sense that I think Stout's 2004 book actually predicts the coming of both Integralism and Christian nationalism over a decade before either movement had the least bit of traction or broad recognition.

What is the alternative for Stout, then?

There are two particular strands to his argument I want to highlight.

First, we will consider his theory of secularization, which is quite different from how "the secular" is usually discussed. For Stout, the chief thing that has changed between the time of Bucer or even Althusius and now with regards to religion in public life is not chiefly about the popularity of religious belief or the establishment of "secular" nations. It is, rather, the way that religious belief operates in public debate. Secularism, for Stout, has almost nothing to do with the percentage of people in a society who identify as "nones." Rather, it has to do with what makes for effective, persuasive public speech. So he begins his treatment of 'the secular' in a seemingly unlikely place: 17th century England. But even there, Stout argues, you see his version of secularism emerge for a very simple reason: As the Bible became more accessible to the masses, as more people began to read, and as opportunities for liberal forms of self-government emerged, it quickly became apparent that even if everyone agreed that the Bible was the chief authority in their lives, they did not all agree about what the Bible taught about, say, economics or the role of government. For this simple reason it became expedient to find other forms of public argument and speech simply because one wanted to be actually effective and actually persuasive. It's perfectly fine to express religious ideas in public, according to Stout, but it is often not terribly effective in a society shaped by modern communications technology and educational norms and practices. So "the secular" emerges, for Stout, within ubiquitously Christian 17th century Britain simply as a means for people to speak persuasively to people who shared their commitment to the Bible but not necessarily their beliefs about what the Bible taught regarding public life.

Second, we will consider his approach to liberal

rights. One of Stout's concerns is with what one defines as the "rules" for how public speech works. In the post-war era, the rulebook, as it were, says you can't really bring religion into public life at all because the only arguments we allow in the public square are arguments that proceed from presuppositions we all share. Since not everyone is religious, no religion allowed. Stout warned in 2004 that this would lead to a backlash as religious people give up on democracy by being convinced that the rules of democracy are stacked against them.

> *We are about to reap the social consequences of a traditionalist backlash against contractarian liberalism. The more thoroughly Rawlsian our law schools and ethic centers become, the more radically Hauerwasian the theological schools become…. One message being preached nowadays in many of the institutions where future preachers are being trained is that liberal democracy is essentially hypocritical when it purports to value free religious expression. Liberalism, according to Ha uerwas, is a secularist ideology that masks a discriminatory program for policing what religious people can say in public. The appropriate response, he sometimes implies, is to condemn freedom and the democratic struggle for justice as 'bad ideas for the church.*

Obviously when Stout wrote these words in 2004, his main concern was the influence of Stanley Hauerwas. But I think if you take the same basic response as that of Hauerwas and transpose it onto something other than a pacifist Anabaptist-influenced Methodist, and instead have it come from traditionalist Catholics or

Christian nationalists, the same critique works quite well and to much more dangerous effect. What is needed, Stout says, is an understanding from secular people that they have Christian neighbors, those neighbors have the same rights to freedom of religion and free expression as they do, and therefore to tell them "no, you aren't allowed to bring that religious doctrine into public life," is to violate their freedom of expression and their freedom of religion. Indeed, Stout even goes so far as to push back quite a lot against critical theory, which he fears practices a sort of Bulverism against religious believers, further alienating them from our common life together:

> *This, in the end, is the irony of critical theory as an across-the board approach to modern democratic discourse. Critical theorists begin by embracing the hope that genuinely democratic discourse will flourish among us. They set out to serve this hope by systematically diagnosing the sources of distortion that arise within our discourse as it is. But they end by explaining away, instead of entering into real conversation with, nearly everything that real people think, say, and feel. When (critical theory) employs the notion of "rationality deficit" as it does it addresses those selves as something more like patients than as fellow citizens.*

In short, via his reading from Emerson, Whitman, and Dewey and the pragmatic democratic tradition of American life, Stout effectively proposes a set of rules that can include religious people in public life in far more capacious ways than what one might hear from a Christian libertarian such as David French or a Christian new natural law theorist. The core of

Stout's vision, then, is not anti-intervention (he easily grants that some social interventions are good and desirable), but anti-domination. And within his anti-domination vision of democracy, there is space for a people that looks very much like what America has often looked like down through the ages.

What are we left with? And how does it relate to Reformational public theology? Simply this: We are left with how America has always actually worked when she has worked her best. One friend of mine remarked to me that he has never felt more patriotic than he has while reading Professor Stout. That is a sentiment I share. I felt grateful that I was able to tour the Capitol only days after finishing a close reading of Stout, for it changed the way I experienced the place. But I also think the kind of gatherings common amongst American Christians today are themselves a vindication of that project. I recently attended a conference held in an Anglican church and jointly sponsored by a Presbyterian ministry and a broadly Christian ministry directed by a Methodist. Multiple speakers at the event were educated at a Catholic university.

Such a blending of Christian traditions within the bonds of peace and Christian love was largely unimaginable prior to the birth of America. And that brings me to the second thing we are left with, I think:

We children of the Reformation, we heirs of Bucer and Calvin and Althusius and Westminster and Heidelberg and Princeton, we are perhaps uniquely equipped to live as virtuous, self-giving people who call our neighbors to a still better life, for it is native to our tradition to believe that peaceableness and liberality are the ordinary marks of Christian political life. As Calvin once wrote,

"As God bestoweth his benefits upon us, let us beware that we acknowledge it towards him by doing good to our neighbors whom he offers to us, so as we neither exempt ourselves from their want, nor seclude them from our abundance, but gently make them partakers with us, as folk that are linked together in an inseparable bond."

JAKE MEADOR IS THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF MERE ORTHODOXY. HE IS A 2010 GRADUATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN WHERE HE STUDIED ENGLISH AND HISTORY. HE LIVES IN LINCOLN, NE WITH HIS WIFE JOIE, THEIR DAUGHTER DAVY JOY, AND SONS WENDELL, AUSTIN, AND AMBROSE. JAKE'S WRITING HAS APPEARED IN THE ATLANTIC, COMMONWEAL, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, FARE FORWARD, THE UNIVERSITY BOOKMAN, BOOKS & CULTURE, FIRST THINGS, NATIONAL REVIEW, FRONT PORCH REPUBLIC, AND THE RUN OF PLAY AND HE HAS WRITTEN OR CONTRIBUTED TO SEVERAL BOOKS, INCLUDING "IN SEARCH OF THE COMMON GOOD," "WHAT ARE CHRISTIANS FOR?" (BOTH WITH INTERVARSITY PRESS), "A PROTESTANT CHRISTENDOM?" (WITH DAVENANT PRESS), AND "TELLING THE STORIES RIGHT" (WITH THE FRONT PORCH REPUBLIC PRESS).

Make Friends Using Mammon Or, The Sacrament of Money

PETER J. LEITHART

I've never been much interested in, or very good at, managing money. Fortunately, I didn't need to be. I had savvy ancestors. The best financial advice I can give is: Choose your parents wisely.

My paternal grandparents owned a grocery store in what's called the "South End" of Columbus, Ohio, and invested their profits in rental real estate. When they died, my two brothers and I inherited a couple dozen properties. Though they were in a declining area of the city, they were profitable enough to provide a welcome trickle of passive income as I pursued my Master's and doctoral studies.

My father inherited my grandparents' financial skill. A medical doctor with a business degree, he made careful investments and bought rental properties of his own. He was wealthy enough to distribute portions of our inheritance when my brothers and I were starting out, when we most needed his help. Papa bought a house for my family in Alabaster, Alabama, which reduced our living expenses enough for me to serve as pastor of a small, poor church. We sold that house to fund three years in Cambridge, but, mysteriously, returned from England with enough money to make a substantial down payment on a house in Idaho, which kept costs manageable as I taught at New Saint Andrews College, then a tiny start-up operation. We sold our Idaho house when we moved back to Alabama, and used the proceeds to purchase another – our *final* – home. My father's gift has kept us domiciled for decades.

We survived, and flourished, because of my father's generosity and my wife's frugality. Apart from periodic stints in higher education, I've been employed all my adult life, but my salary has never been very high, especially for the head of a family of twelve. Most of my adult children make far more money than I ever made. We've lived on next to nothing; we've lived on just enough; we now live comfortably – all because of my wife's steady hand. My other best (not second-best) financial advice: Marry up.

What I lack in practical prowess, I've (slightly) made up in theoretical interest in money. I've been able

to learn the basics, both by pondering my father's example and by exploring the Scriptures. One of the main things I've learned is: Money isn't what we think it is, and it's not for what we think it's for.

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The question, "What is money?" is prior to the question, "What do we *do* with money?" And the Bible's answer to the first question is, Money is a power. It's one of the rulers of this age.

"The rich rules over the poor," Solomon says (Prov. 22:7). It's an observation rather than a value judgment. Whether in the form of status, honor, reputation, fame, or stock portfolios and bank accounts, wealth confers power – the power to purchase things and people's time, the power to mold life according to our desires, the power to control outcomes and to avoid or recover from damage. Kings are wealthy because wealth makes kings. Wealth rules.

Solomon means it when he says money guards us as wisdom guards us (Eccl. 7:12). He's not being ironic when he writes that "money is the answer to everything" (Eccl. 10:19). Wealth is a fortress (Prov. 10:15) and a strong city (Prov. 19:4). Money keeps the wolf from the door. Wealth purchases a gated community, a home security system, and, at the upper echelons, private police protection. Wealth is a Get-Out-of-Jail card that buys the best lawyers and, in some cases, compliant judges.

Wealth isn't simply a protective power. Money acts. Global corporations can transform a small town, or an entire country, by out-sourcing manufacturing. Wealth expands the imagination. A billionaire has

resources to alter the political landscape through well-placed donations or a well-funded think tank, by serving cocktails to select fellow billionaires and politicos. The rest of us know our measly campaign contributions accomplish next to nothing. We lack the power to dream of nudging the system in our desired direction.

Wealth is a power because it's the most protean of all human institutions. Money is a magical substance that can be translated into anything – into bread and wine, into lands and buildings, into clothing and jewelry, into factories and machines, into electric cars and spaceships, into sexual fantasies. In our Vanity Fair economy, everything's up for sale. Jesus turned water to wine; a rich man turns computer blips into a vineyard. The wealthy are real-life alchemists for whom turning paper into gold is a daily miracle.

The Scriptures warn about wealth not because it's useless but because it's charged with quasi-divine potency. It's more powerful than any other weapon because it can gain control of every other weapon. Handling wealth is more dangerous than playing with live wires, and only the mature and wise know how to channel its power effectively and justly. We require teens to be trained and licensed before putting them behind the wheel of large, fast-moving machines. Perhaps we should license bank accounts.

Given the power and risk of wealth, we might expect Scripture to counsel ascetic avoidance. It doesn't. On the contrary, in many places, it revels in riches. Abram and Jacob accumulate slaves, flocks, and herds. Job is the wealthiest man of the east before he loses everything, but his end is more luxurious than his beginning. Solomon imports so much precious metal

that silver becomes as common as stones (1 Kgs. 10:27). The accounts of the tabernacle and temple measure the gold, gold, gold of Yahweh's house, and the book of Numbers lingers with obsessive repetition silver dishes, silver bowls, and gold pans presented to Yahweh from the plunder of Egypt. Numbers 7 could have been written by an ancient Hebrew Scrooge ben McDuck.

Yet Scripture is too full of warnings and cautions to support prosperity gospels.

> *Wealth induces amnesia: "Beware, that you do not forget the Lord your God . . . when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, and when your herds and your flocks multiple, and our silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God" (Deut. 8:10-14).

> *Money blocks the gate to the kingdom: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:24).

> *Greed shrinks life down to what we own: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

> *We've got a stark choice to make: "No man can serve two masters . . . You cannot serve God and Mammon" (Mark 6:24).

Of course, these are warnings against *trusting* in riches. Nowhere does the Bible *forbid* riches. But we're at risk if we underestimate the lure of Mammon. Money, to repeat, is a power, and a seductive one. Wealth rules; if we let it, it will rule us.

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"Give me neither poverty nor riches," Old Agur prays (Prov. 30:7-9). Excessive wealth tempts us to prideful denial of God (see Deut. 8:11-20). Grinding poverty can provoke covetousness, envy, and theft. Best to be somewhere in the middle.

Agur speaks wisdom, but it's not the deepest wisdom. At base, the biblical management of wealth *isn't* a balancing act. Scripture upends our expectations about the uses of money at a more basic level. It's neither "Buy nothing" nor "Buy everything, for all is a good gift of God." And it's not, as in the late Gary North's gloss on Agur's prayer, "Make me middle class."

Rather, the Bible teaches that money doesn't exist primarily for *things* at all. Money is a token of personal relation, a sacrament of communion. If money is a philosopher's stone, its primary power is to translate base metals into allies.

That interpersonal emphasis starts near the beginning of the Bible. As Luigino Bruni observes, the Bible's first mentions money, exchange, a market, and price negotiation in Genesis 23, when Abraham buys a plot for Sarah's tomb. The value of the property isn't merely economic, but bound up the promise of Yahweh, Abraham's hopes for his progeny, and the conversion of land into a quasi-sacred "place." Notably, the determination of price isn't merely economic either. Abraham and the sons of Heth talk about price, but their haggling is embedded in an interpersonal

market of honor: "the selling price is shown as an almost marginal detail inside a conversation in which generous offers, praises and recognitions of dignity and honour are exchanged by the counterparts." It shows "economic exchanges . . . are encounters of persons" and "the first merchandise to be exchanged at the market are words." [1]

This personalist conception undergirds the Proverbs' warnings about accumulation. "A man with an evil eye hastens after wealth, and does not know that want will come upon him" (Prov. 28:22). We shouldn't miss the counterintuitive paradox of Solomon's warning. An "evil eye" is an eye focused on protecting wealth, but why is it evil? It seems like a virtue: Attentive wealth management is the path to plenty, not want. Naturally, it seems that hoarding goods is the best way to ensure we *don't* lack anything. Solomon says the opposite. Why?

He explains in a companion proverb a few verses later: "He who gives to the poor will never want, but he who hides his eyes will have many curses" (Prov. 28:27). Here is an inverse paradox from that of verse 22: Gathering and hoarding wealth leads to want, while divesting ourselves of wealth ensures we'll *never* want. We can sharpen the paradox: The divestment Solomon mentions isn't *investment*, but charity. Giving to the poor seems like dumping money in an economic black hole, but Solomon says it's the path to financial security. There's that "eye" again, this time covered or closed. We should think the eye of verses 22 and 27 together: The evil eye is closed to the poor because

its field of vision is cluttered with the apparatus of accumulating, preserving, and increasing treasure. Eyes dazzled by the glitter of Mammon are blinded to human flesh, especially if the flesh hasn't had a recent shower (see Isa. 58:7).

Augustine said spiritual goods like knowledge are possessed only by dispossession; we truly have them only if we give them away. Augustine failed to grasp the spirituality of biblical economics. For Solomon, *material* goods too are owned only in the mode of gifts-received, retained only in the mode of gifts-given. For Solomon, divestment is investment. And that's true because money is a sacrament of communion.

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That Jesus shares this personalist perspective on money is most evident in His puzzling parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-13). A rich man dismisses his steward because of a report that the steward is misusing his wealth. The steward acts quickly to secure his position in the interim between his dismissal and public knowledge of his dismissal. While his employer's debtors still *think* the steward is in charge, he reduces the debts owed by 20-50%. The debtors are overjoyed, of course, and the steward puts the master is in a tough spot. Assuming the steward acted on his employer's behalf, the debtors are grateful. The steward has done is former boss a favor, by bolstering his reputation for generosity, and the rich man would be loath to correct the misimpression by insisting, on the contrary, that he wants payment in full. If the rich

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[1] Bruni, *Economy of Salvation: Ethical and Anthropological Foundations of Market Relations in the First Two Books of the Bible* (New York: Springer, 2019) 40-41. Imagine what Abraham and Ephron would make of Amazon.

man goes ahead with his plan to fire the steward, the steward has allies to turn to. But the rich man may *not* go through with it, lest he appear mean-spirited and ungenerous, and lose honor among his peers.

Jesus commends the steward because he knows what money is for: "Make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness" (Luke 16:9). The steward is shrewder in the treasure of this age than the sons of light. In context, *this* is what it means to be faithful in the "little thing" of managing money. Jesus doesn't suddenly start talking about wise portfolio management. We prove ourselves faithful in little things and deserving of having true riches entrusted to us when we follow the steward's example of making friends with mammon (Luke 16:10-11).

Jesus pushes the point a necessary, *theological* step further. If we make friends by using mammon, we'll be received into "eternal dwellings" when mammon fails (Luke 16:9). Jesus isn't being hyperbolic or metaphorical. Earlier in Luke, Jesus urges His disciples to be "rich toward God" and to store up "treasures in heaven" (12:21, 33) by "selling" possessions and "giving to charity" (12:33). Divestment is investment because God exists, because there is a just and generous Father who balances the cosmic books and rewards those who are merciful as He is merciful. If this seems mercenary, it's because we still don't grasp what money is: Giving to the poor doesn't *purchase* God's favor, but is a quasi-sacramental token of our friendship with God.

Money makes friends, and the only question is which friends we're trying to make. Are we making friends of the world, or are we using our money in a way that makes us friends with God? Are we deploying resources to buy connections with the wealthy, powerful, and famous, so we can bask in their glory and get return invitations and benefits from them? Or are we using our wealth to honor God and seek a reward in the resurrection of the just? Who's on our guests list – the mighty and rich, or the poor, weak, and lame? Generosity is always shadowed by the possibility of Godfathering.[2] We're tempted to be generous to the destitute to purchase a payback of loyalty and service. Which is why, always and everywhere, we remember we spend and give before the face of, and in imitation of our Father, who gives generously and without reproach. We can give without thought of return only when we seek return from our Father (Luke 6:30, 38).

The apostles operate in the same framework, with a missional twist. As soon as the Spirit falls, believers are united in their communion in apostolic teaching, table fellowship, prayer, *and* goods (Acts 2:43-47). Their unity of heart and soul is expressed in sacrificial financial gifts; many sell lands and other property to donate the proceeds to the apostles, who distribute the donations so there are no poor among them (Acts 4:32-35). As the church expands beyond Jerusalem, the communion of goods expands with it. Paul collects funds from Gentile churches and brings them to Jerusalem as famine relief. In Paul's view, this exchange is as much to promote communion between Jew and Gentile as it is to feed hungry Jews. Gentiles

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[1] See my "The Dark Side of Gratitude," FirstThings.com, August 31, 2012, available at https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2012/08/the-dark-side-of-gratitude.

have shared in the spiritual wealth of Israel, so they're obligated to share material goods with Jews (Rom. 15:22-29). The body of Christ is knit together by a reciprocal form of "equality" (*isotes*): The abundance of one supplies the need of another, so, in the future, the abundance of the second can supply the need of the first (2 Cor. 8:13-15).

The church is unified by the word and by ritual sacraments – the washing of baptism and the table fellowship of the Eucharist. Equally, the church is united by the sacrament of money, which, exchanged across ancient boundaries, contributes to the breaking down of the dividing wall, the end of enmity, and reconciliation all in the one new humanity.

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Much of the common wisdom of Christian investing can find a place within this framework, though it will be differently flavored. My experience provides a test case.

My father invested to make a profit. He wasn't extravagant, but he liked to eat out and buy nice things, especially a new luxury car every few years. But his main investment aim was to do good for people, and first of all to the people closest to him: He wanted to provide for my mother and their three sons during our childhood, and to have a surplus to give us a jump start as we entered adulthood. That jump start didn't just benefit my "career," but ensured my children would have comfortable lives, despite my years of meager compensation. My father helped to feed, clothe, and house "the least of these." Sure, they were his grandchildren, but that doesn't affect the point: If a man doesn't take care of the members of his own household, he's worse than an infidel.

And, because his money helped launch me in my vocation, the scope of his generosity is far wider. Obviously, I wouldn't be alive at all without my father. And most certainly I wouldn't have the life I have – my educational opportunities, pastoral leadership, the chance to teach undergraduate theology, the priceless freedom to read and write – without his money. People who are blessed by my teaching and writing enjoy the overflow of my father's blessing. Directly, my father's skill with money blessed dozens, perhaps a few hundred. Indirectly, my father's skill with money has blessed thousands.

My father's money made it possible for me to sit at my desk writing this article about money. When he distributed portions of our inheritance, he had no idea he was using Mammon to make friends with *you*, the reader of this essay. I trust he has.

PETER J. LEITHART IS PRESIDENT OF THE THEOPOLIS INSTITUTE IN BIRMINGHAM, AL

IN THE DAYS WHEN THE JUDGES RULE

A Review of Aaron Renn's *Life in the Negative World*

STEVIN PETER

I. THE ARTICLE THAT LAUNCHED A THOUSAND RESPONSES.

It has been more than two years since Aaron Renn wrote the "Three Worlds of Evangelicalism." Since then, it has easily become the most cited article in *First Things*. Renn's framework has been discussed and dissected at length. However, the controversy with his views lies not in what he's saying, but in what it means, namely that the past forms of Christian witness, from Billy Graham to Tim Keller, do not know how to address the cultural moment. So it was not surprising when James Wood applied Renn's thesis to challenge Keller's model of *the* way forward, a flurry of pushback came from the highest representatives of Evangelicalism. The essence of this pushback lies not in rejecting the reality of the *negative world* but its particular uniqueness. So Keller would respond to Wood by claiming that New York was in a "negative world" when Redeemer was planted. Likewise, Patrick Miller has responded to Renn by saying that the "negative world has always been around." Miller's response is particularly helpful, because he summarizes the central theological critique of Renn's framework: The Church has always been in the negative world from the time of the Apostles, because the Church is always in the midst of Babylon. "Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you." (1 John 3:13). The Church has always been exiled in Babylon. He says: "When you realize that Jesus expected his followers to be joyful outsiders in every era—sojourners, pilgrims,

exiles—you become much less reactive to the negative world around you… Jesus gave us everything we need to respond wisely." The problem isn't the negative world, but the Church who has forgotten that it has always been in the negative world.

However, this take misunderstands Renn's paradigm. In fact, I believe that even people sympathetic to Renn's framework misunderstand its implications. The release of his book, *Life in the Negative World*, is important because it offers a full picture of what living in the negative world means. His prescriptions are more than just good advice. They prove a robust operating paradigm for Churches. What James Hunter's *To Change the World* was to a previous generation of evangelicals, Renn's *Life in the Negative World* promises to be for a new generation of evangelicals where *faithful presence* feels too neutral.

II. A NOTE ON GENRE

The comparison to Hunter's *To Change the World* is apt for reasons besides it being another work on Christian Engagement. Hunter is a sociologist, whose training in culture and theory allowed him to show a generation that cultural change functions not by moving a majority but by a coordinated effort of elites – a concept foreign to the revivalist impulse of Evangelicalism. Renn, by contrast, is not a sociologist, theologian, or even a historian. He is a consultant. Unlike academics and pastors, consultants are paid to analyze dysfunctional systems and make recommendations for improvement. The training of a consultant isn't to be *precise* but practical, straight-to-the-point, actionable. In the same way that Hunter's sociological training makes him a one-of-one in Evangelicalism, so Renn's consultant experience makes him a one-of-one as well. Much of the initial pushback against Renn's three worlds stems from misunderstanding the value a consultant delivers. Critics of Renn, who say that we "have always been in Babylon", offer a theological response to a non-theological observation. Likewise, responses that point out instances of the "negative world" in the 80s or 90s, or point out the effectiveness of "neutral" or "positive world" strategies for their own churches, misunderstand that a consultant isn't a historian or a pastor. Instead, consultants offer leaders simplified frameworks for understanding complex realities *for the purpose of better outcomes*. One irony I believe behind much of the critique of the three worlds idea is that it introduced a framework and outlined the problems but never offered a solution…. until now.

III.   WHAT IS NEGATIVE WORLD ANYWAY?

But first, we must see what Renn's three worlds model really means. Here are the three worlds as he presents them in the book:

> **POSITIVE WORLD (1964-1994).** Society at large retains a mostly positive view of Christianity. To be known as a good, churchgoing man or woman remains part of being an upstanding citizen in society.

Publicly being a Christian enhances social status. Christian moral norms are still the basic moral norms of society, and violating them can lead to negative consequences.

NEUTRAL WORLD (1994-2014). Society takes a neutral stance toward Christianity. Christianity no longer has privileged status, but nor is it disfavored. Being publicly known as a Christian has neither a positive nor a negative impact on social status.

NEGATIVE WORLD (2014-PRESENT). In this era, society has an overall negative view of Christianity. Being known as a Christian is a social negative, particularly in the higher status domains of society. Christian morality is expressly repudiated and now seen as a threat to the public good and new public moral order. Holding to Christian moral views, publicly affirming the teachings of the Bible can lead to negative consequences. [1]

Most readers have read this *ad nauseam*. However, Renn offers three incidents that clarify how Christianity operates in these different worlds. In 1987, senator Gary Hart having a woman stay overnight when his wife wasn't there caused such an uproar that he dropped out of the presidential race. In 1998, Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky sparked controversy, but the Democrat party rallied around him, and he maintained his presidency. Finally, in 2016, Donald Trump ran for the presidency, and one month after a leaked tape of his crude comments about women, he proceeded to win the presidency with overwhelming Evangelical support. These examples show that transitioning from positive to neutral and negative doesn't merely mean progressive capture in culture. Rather, the transition indicates an opposition to Christian values norming society. Positive world means something like: "Christian morality" forms the substance of our leaders and guides our mission. Neutral world is indifferent. Negative world is suspicious at best and hostile at worst.

Hence, the emergence of numerous right-wing movements suspicious or hostile to Christianity (the populist right, Nietzschean right, etc.) is itself an outcome of the negative world. These movements may even show outright hostility to traditional Christian emphases, such as the solidarity of the human race under Adam and the importance of social justice. Negative world is not a respecter of parties.

Moreover, negative world generally leads to a pervasiveness of vice in general. I can't watch any sport without being flooded with gambling ads. I can't walk down a street in New York City without passing by a marijuana dispensary. I can go to any local deli and get what I need to smoke, drink, have sex, and gamble all in the same place! I go on the subway and see ads promoting everything from birth control to polyamorous dating.

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[1]Aaron M. Renn, *Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024). p.3

This is my daily life, and I can experience all of these things and not bat an eye. That is negative world.

IV. WHAT'S NEGATIVE ABOUT NEGATIVE WORLD?

Now we could stop right there and map negative world to Babylon or Rome, Positive world to Israel and Christendom, and proceed. But that would still not take into account the type of negative world Renn is describing. Instead, we must examine not just Christianity's relation to society but the type of outcomes the Church and Christians in general have in each world. By combining Renn's descriptions of positive, neutral, and negative world with Hunter's observations on the nature of cultural production and influence, we get a clearer picture of the negative world that has eluded many.

Examining the positive world is a useful benchmark. Positive world is a state in which being a Christian enhances social status, and not being a Christian or violating Christian norms can bring social risk. First, it is critical to understand there is variation in the outcomes in the description. What Renn is saying is that on average, in the positive world, being a Christian is a good and expected thing in society's value structure. There might be subgroups that aren't Christian, or for whom being a Christian would be a net negative socially. Still, these people do not determine nor enforce the majority of society's values. Using Hunter's language, we might say that in a positive world, the centers of cultural influence such as law, media, entertainment, and finance actively reinforce Christian values, shaping the rest of society. Groups with non-Christian values are seen as an outlier/underground/countercultural.

Now what I am describing here is a distribution. In fact, I believe the entire misunderstanding hinges on the understanding that these "worlds" describe different types of *distributions* with different risk profiles for Christians.

Hunter's work in *To Change the World* could be summarized in two different distributions. First, Evangelicals believe that cultural influence is a linear function of population. More Christians means more Christian influence. Like the graph below:
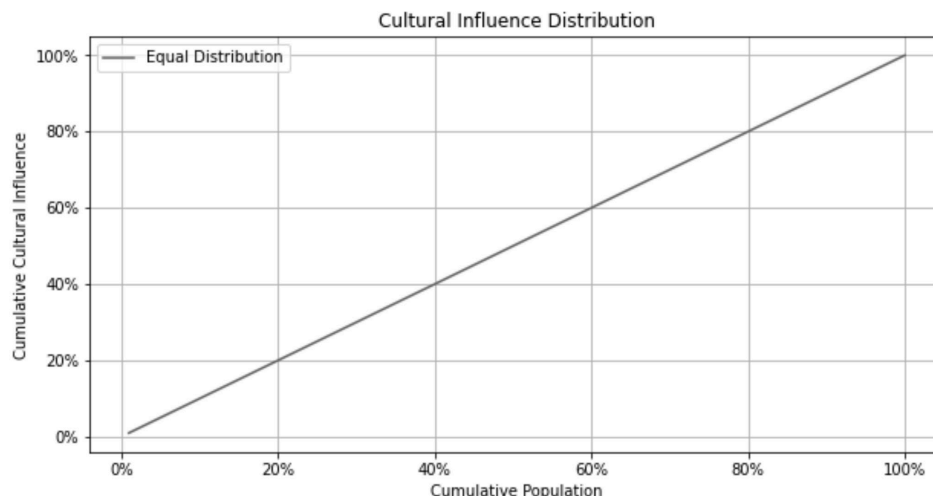
However, cultural influence doesn't really work that way. In reality, it is more like 20% of the population hold 80% of cultural influence. It is these *few* whose reinforcing network effects determine how the rest of the population functions. A soul is a soul, but for culture, what matters is not the majority, but the select minority who hold an outsized amount of cultural capital. The distribution is something economists call a pareto distribution:
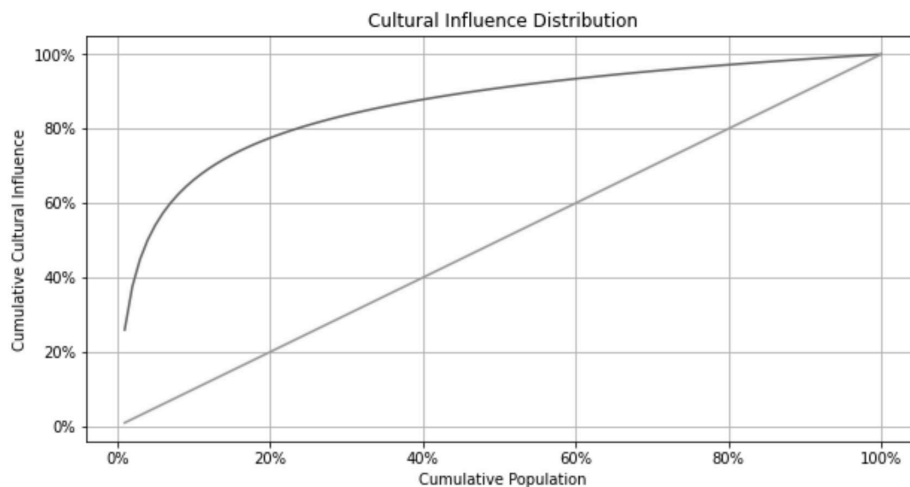

Now "positive world", is a world where the people who hold cultural capital promote Christian values. What this means for the rest of the population is that not being a Christian poses a certain level of social risk for the average person. The more proximate people are to power, influence, etc. in the positive world, the more risk they expose themselves to by not being a Christian. This distribution would look like this:
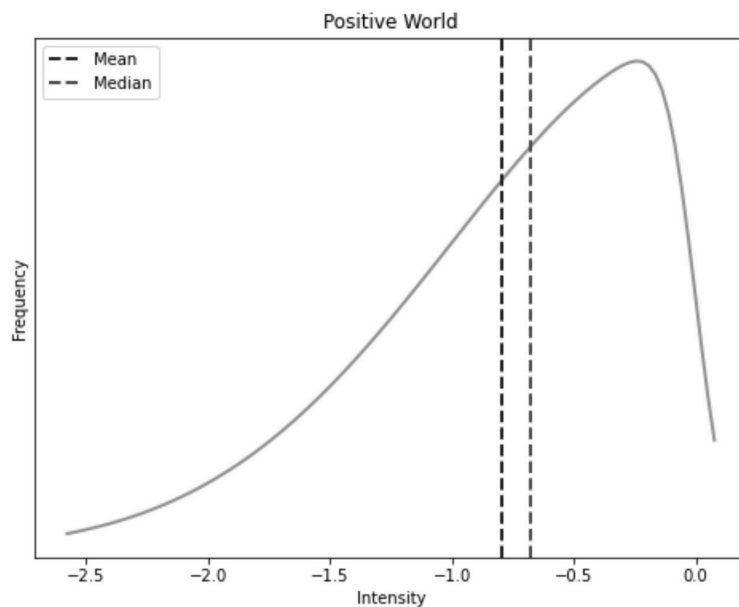
It is "negative skewed" because it reflects negative outcomes for non-Christians in positive world. Moreover, it shows a simple point looked over in Renn's description: there will be many people where there is little existential risk posed to not being a Christian, but for some, there is in fact a very large amount of risk. We might say that what happened to Gary Hart would lie at the tail of this distribution, being one of the more visible outcomes. However, Gary Hart dropping out reinforces the value structure and incentivizes everyone else to uphold Christian values.

Conversely, being a Christian would be a positive thing, and for some, it would allow them to gain outsized upside. We can think here of the opposite of Gary Hart, let's say someone like Reinhold Niebuhr, whose education and training lands him on the cover of Time and who remains a respected thinker in international relations, public policy, and theology. This too is an "extreme" in positive world, being a Christian won't lead you to become a Niebuhr. But again, his example reinforces the value structure. On average, being a Christian would expose you to greater social trust and influence. We can say that the average outcome in positive world is the faithful pastor who has gained the respect of his entire community despite not being well-educated.

Now one might say, that there were negative outcomes for Christians during these days or that there were still issues in the culture that stood against Christian teachings. However, these statements do not rebut this description. To rebut this description, one must challenge the claim that Christian norms shaped public life in positive world and that there was in general, considerable risk to being hostile to Christianity in public society. These challenges must not rely on "outliers" in the time, since that precisely confirms the thesis that the general trend was pro-Christianity! Now, in a 'neutral world", the holders of cultural capital were on average "neutral" towards Christian claims. Which is to say, that the production of culture didn't actively promote Christian ideals, but they weren't opposed either. One could be proximate to cultural power while having and advocating for Christian ideals publicly, so long as you are seen as credible. Moreover, people in cultural influence are actually open to being convinced of Christianity. Ministries like Veritas Forum flourish in neutral world, partly because of their audience's quintessential neutral world qualities - college students who may or may not be religious but are open to embracing Christianity, if it can be shown to be relevant to them. In the case of Veritas, and indeed much of Keller's ministry, this looks like showing Christianity as intellectually credible and awe-inspiring (Christianity tells a better story). In the seeker-sensitive movement, it looks like showing Christianity as personally comforting and therapeutic. For the politically concerned, it looks like showing Christianity as politically impactful. The diversity of these responses, all of which Renn mentions, describe what happens in a normal distribution.
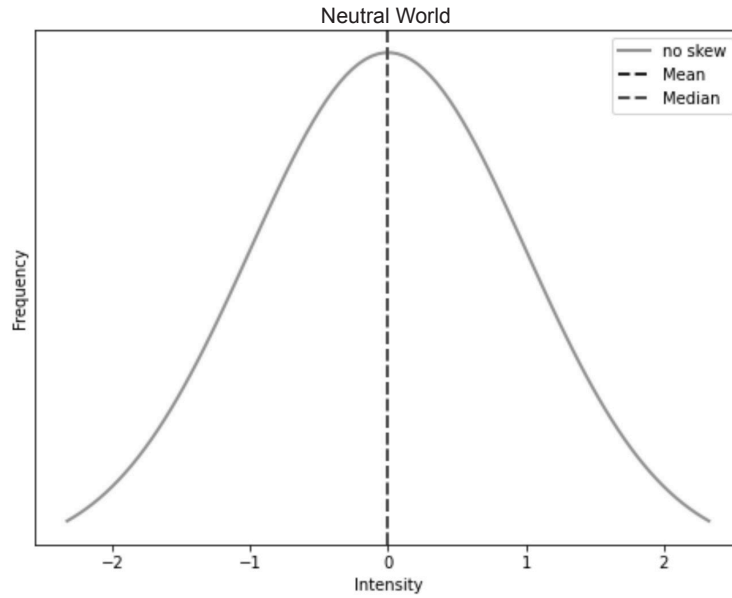
Neutral World

In this distribution, the majority of outcomes are in average range. There is equal variance positive or negative. This distribution in fact could describe the state of "unbelievers" in neutral world, with the majority being "seeker/sensitive", with only a few being avid atheists or overly sympathetic to Christianity. On average, being a Christian or a non-Christian would have minimal hindrance to one's social status. The strategy of cultural engagement is the best strategy for Christians in neutral world. Witnessing and appealing to the cultural elites who are on average, open to Christianity would likely draw in people who have an outsized impact in promoting Christian norms.

The central nerve of Renn's argument then, is that we don't live in these distributions. If the neutral world was a normal distribution, negative world is a skewed distribution with Christian status being a source of outsized, extreme risk. In positive world, being against Christianity was the outlier in civic society, in negative world being a Christian is.
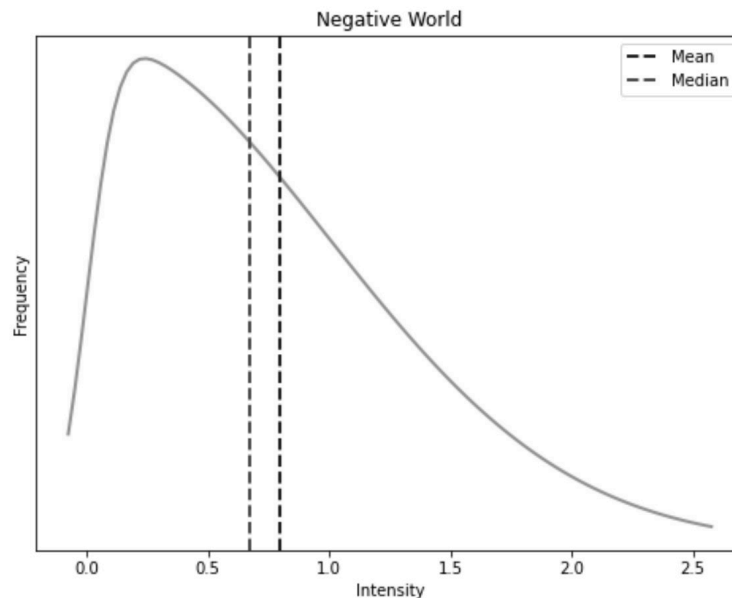
Negative World

V. JUDGES NOT BABYLON

However, the roles are not simply reversed. Negative world is not just the inverse of positive world. While Renn understates this, it is an essential point to draw out. The caveat has to do with the type of culture negative world creates. The holders of cultural capital have not simply substituted Christian values with an alternative set but promote the very loss of order itself. The only values are no values. That is, our culture promotes libertinism, everyone doing what is right in their own eyes. Sociologically, Hunter calls this the process of dissolution: "By dissolution, I refer to the deconstruction of the most basic assumptions about reality."[2] Our culture doesn't enforce any guide to who or what we are, nor what we should do. Instead, what is promoted is turning inside ourselves and determining our own values. This process results in the fracturing of society alongside tribes/enclaves of people with similar values. In other words, positive world is a more integrated culture because it possesses a narrative that can unite a people together. Negative world, in contrast, is fragmented, which means mass disintegration. So, whereas we might see in positive world 20% of the population holding 80% of the cultural capital, we might see something like 30% of the population holding 60% in negative world. Simply put, negative world inherently erodes public norms. Moreover, Christianity is viewed with suspicion or sometimes with active hostility precisely in its attempt to claim that there are public norms!

Therefore, there should be no surprise that there is a wide variance in how Christianity interacts in current society. This is why Renn acknowledges that there are parts of the country that operate with positive and neutral world backgrounds. Industries such as professional sports and nursing welcome expressions of Christian faith. Large swaths of the country still encourage or wouldn't be opposed to encouraging Christian values. However, he warns that negative world will eventually reach them. Dissolution spreads like like wildfire when it is not addressed: a little leaven leavens the whole lump.

This is precisely the problem with "neutral" world strategies in the negative world. As they seek proximity to cultural influence, Christians become exposed to substantial and even hostile social risk, which incentivizes them to either not mention their faith or only mention the parts of their faith that don't require pushback against liberal claims. Being quiet and agreeable is the "play it safe" strategy. This causes everyone else to want to play it safe. For instance, Jack Phillips being sued for making choices in accordance with his Christian conscience automatically introduces the possibility of substantial legal risk in every Christian's mind. Princeton Seminary's withdrawal of the Kuyper Prize speech from Tim Keller signals to every Christian that they can be faithful, charitable, and thoughtful, but they can still be rejected. The occasional Twitter storms in reaction to a pastor's sermon signal to every pastor that their sermons could be mined, edited, and employed in a campaign to discredit them. These are the type of

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[2]James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). p.205

phenomena that reinforce the stifling of Christian witness. Consequently, the norms of liberalism take greater hold, making Christian moral outliers. In negative world, Christianity must justify itself to the various social strata in society, not the other way around. Yet, there is no organized, central, particular opposition to Christianity.

The combination of pervasive risk and a decentralized environment suggests that the majority has gotten it wrong.

We are not in Babylon. We are in the era of the Judges.

The parallels are striking. For one, the pace at which society has forgotten biblical norms is just as quick. The era of the Judges describes a time where liberalism reigned: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." (Judg 17:6). The people of Israel undergo volatile times between rest and oppression, sometimes at the same time! Moreover, the judges themselves prove to be progressively liberal themselves – becoming increasingly compromised and pragmatic. Most of all, the end of Judges shows us that there is a loss of leadership, causing everyone to blame everyone else for the misfortunes of Israel.

We don't live in Babylon, our land is more chaotic, and that should sober us. Let me explain. Babylon is an organized world with low variance.

Organized World, low variance.
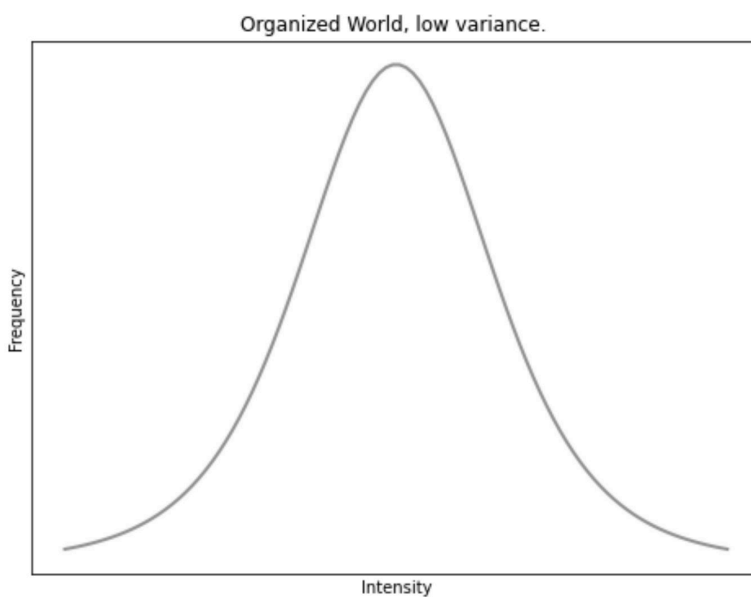
Babylon is able to enforce its will effectively. It has its own norms and promotes its own values. Judges is an unorganized world with high risk.

Higher Variance

(x-axis: Intensity, y-axis: Frequency)
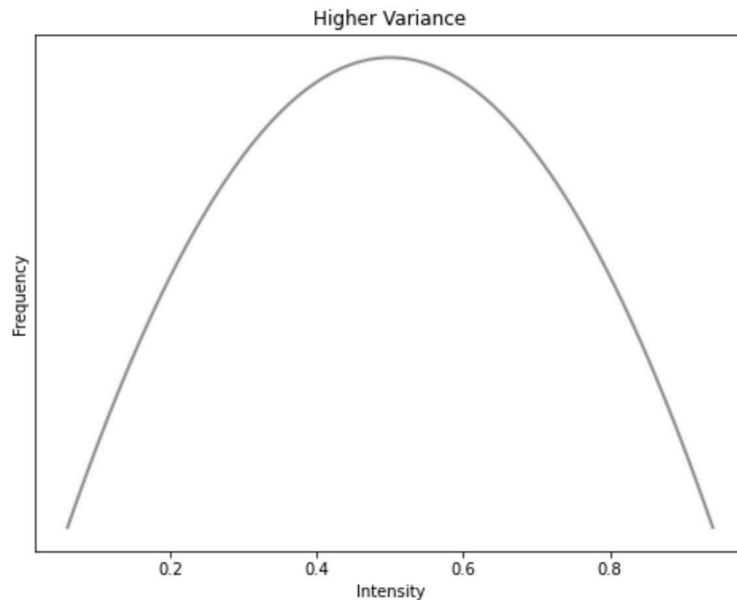
The world of Babylon is a fragile world, it takes effort to maintain. Cultural capital must be stewarded and gate-kept to preserve Babylon's power. The world of the Judges is not fragile. It is chaos. Without a divinely ordained figure that unites the tribes and introduces order (like Samuel), the era of the Judges simply continues.

Renn's negative world should be taken to refer to the enhanced risk Christians face in society because of dissolution. Those who say we have always been in Babylon or that the Church has always been in negative word, risk overlooking the unique acidic effect libertine liberalism plays on society. Judges captures the eeriness of being a stranger and at risk in your own homeland. Babylon doesn't. The strategies that work in Babylon may not work as well in Judges. Babylon has a concentrated enemy – a city, a king, or an institution. Judges is a spread-out amorphous minefield with extreme outcomes, like having a compromised Samson provide victory or the near slaughter of Benjamin. Neutral world strategies ignore these downside risks. At the same time, those who suggest that the way toward Christian renewal is the institution of a Christian prince also discount the great variance in the land of the Judges. Perhaps in a Babylon model, a Christian prince would have outsized change (think of, say, Xi Jinping becoming Christian). But in Judges, there is little chance such a figure might unite diverse and hostile groups together - save for a broad revival that fundamentally unites the culture. In fact, such a figure might bring on more hostility and expose all Christians to ruin. Judges tell us our problems are not simply who is in charge or what the laws are, but that we are disposed to reject any restraint on our freedom. The response of politicians, voters, and counties in favor of abortion post-Dobbs reveals the culture's rejection of restraint. I am not in any way rejecting the justness of the decision; I am merely noting that there is no single silver bullet, whether a prince or a law, that can break through a negative world.

VI.   SURVIVING IN THE LAND OF JUDGES.

Instead, Judges tells us that before we can focus on getting out of negative world, we have to first figure out how to survive in it. The priority is, above-all, survival in a contested environment. This is how Renn frames his prescriptions as what the Church needs to do to protect itself from "negative world."

He simplifies all this analysis above and gets straight to the point:

> "How should we live if there's always the possibility of social rejection or being fired from our job for our Christian beliefs? We have obvious biblical answers—-walking by faith in God's promises…but I want to focus on a practical strategy for structuring our lives in a negative world…One answer is to restructure our lives to reduce our exposure to risk from negative events…We should work to be resilient when faced with these negative shocks," [3]

This is the type of state that trader Nicholas Talab calls "antifragile". While he mentions this concept briefly in this section, "antifragile" summarizes Renn's prescriptions personally, institutionally, and missionaly. Being antifragile is how Christians should survive in a world with great uncertainty. For each of these components, Renn provides three prescriptions that roughly embody three principles: have skin in the game, make it costly for the world to attack you, and be protected when it does.

The first section, living personally, gives us three terms to latch onto: Excellence, Obedience, and Resilience.
The first prescription is to "become obedient": "The first challenge for American evangelicals living in the negative world, then, is to examine ourselves, consider our ways, count the cost, and commit to denying ourselves, taking up our crosses and following Christ in everything."[4] Now, I hardly imagine anyone would say we should not become obedient. However, Renn helpfully points out that in negative world, the "cost" of discipleship might require forsaking our jobs, social status, and vision of success. But Renn gives this prescription as part of the *strategy* of living in the negative, which is critical. Aside from the direct Christian duty to obey Christ, beginning with obedience in a world of uncertainty amounts to saying you need to have skin in the game. You can't navigate negative world, unless you have something to lose. He is telling us to actually take on the risk of being in the negative world, to be true to what the Gospel says we are, despite the cost. To not take the risk is to let negative world win. Stubborn, dogged commitment to Christ is the first part of surviving negative world.

For instance, none of the disciples ever recanted their belief in the resurrection despite the tremendous risk in believing it. Indeed, all but one suffered martyrdom for this one belief. But their stubbornness and frank intolerance

[2]Renn, *Life in the Negative World,* p.84

of any opinion to the contrary led to the spread of this belief throughout the ancient world. Christians in ancient Rome counted the cost but simply refused to accept the Roman pantheon. Though they suffered for their intolerance, it was the precondition to surviving through persecution and eventually converting the empire. Though we are not being killed for the faith, the negative world parallels Rome's desire to placate Christianity into just one part of the pantheon of its gods. This compromise is the negative world's true defeat against Christianity, and being obedient to Christ requires being against it. To make that commitment, that whatever the world throws at us, we will not fall away, is not just obedience to the scriptures, but the first step in changing the culture. Evangelicals should latch on wholeheartedly to what Renn is saying here. We live for an audience of one. The first step remains: *"If would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."*

Second Renn tells us, "become excellent", which roughly corresponds to saying: pursuing being the best in every domain God has placed you in, to his glory. He devotes a substantial amount to pushing back against the Evangelical disposition against ambition, citing biblical and sociological implications of shying away from reaching cultural elites. However, I believe this disposition has lessened to some extant by those who came up in neutral world since they understand the importance of reaching the cultural elite in changing an entire culture. Yet besides being a strategy for cultural change, pursuing excellence acts as a great deterrent against the risks of negative world. When someone is truly excellent at what they do, they can be public and even forthright about their faith. Think of an incredible singer like Justin Bieber, a top designer like Jerry Lorenzo, or a top executive like CEO of Intel, Patrick Gelsinger. These people all have publicly spoken about their faith, and have been afforded more opportunities because of their excellence. The world incurs a cost in attacking them. This phenomenon is commonplace in American sports – athletes naturally talk about their faith in Christ, motivating their desire to be the best in their sport and credit God for every one of their wins. This mentality, applied at the personal level, amounts to gathering cultural power by simply being the best, which exposes you to the upside (cultural renewal) and potentially minimizes the downside (social ostracization). Even in a more "Babylon" like world, pursuing excellence appears to be a divinely blessed strategy. From Joshua to Daniel to Ezra and Nehemiah, those who pursue excellence will eventually gain cultural influence. How much more then, in the land of the Judges, can someone who promises and delivers the best in their field be afforded opportunities, resources, and the like. And even if the world purposely attacked Christians despite their excellence, they would resign themselves to mediocrity and eventual dissolution.

Finally, Renn tells us to "become resilient." If excellence means finding the upside and mitigating the downside, resilience means protecting oneself from the possibility of an extreme downside. In the land of the Judges, extreme events happen; there are high highs like Othniel and Shamgar but there are low-lows like Jephthah and Samson. However, the low-lows risk extinction. Renn's goal in proscribing resiliency is to help us avoid

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[4]Ibid. p.60.

ruin. We cannot have skin in the game; we cannot sacrificially love and pursue excellence…if we are dead. We should not resign ourselves to being attacked by the culture but instead best optimize our chances of surviving short of disobedience. This amounts to saying: can we survive the worst negative world throws at us? Renn's practical suggestions, ranging from financial frugality to working in less high-profile jobs, are geared toward minimizing costs to livelihood for having a socially disapproved opinion. He even advises Christian to build or work at small, diversifying capital and sources of employment. Ownership of land, business, and capital is indeed the ultimate form of protection against "negative world's" risk. Even Renn's suggestion to consider living in a more conservative town, should be read not as an escape from negative world, but a strategic minimization of extreme risk. However, pursuing this strategy does come at the expense of excellence and cultural change.

VII. THE ANTIFRAGILE OPTION

Hence, there is a tension here that lies at the heart of Renn's advice, but it reveals the tension at the heart of Christian discourse today. Resilience and excellence can be thought of as two distinct strategies. Resilience corresponds to the "Benedict Option" approach of becoming functionally independent from larger society. Going all-in on resilience means functionally creating a parallel society where members can survive ostracization, educate their children, and lead them to healthy marriages. However, this approach doesn't capture the upside of becoming integral in society. "Benedict Option" is a strategy built for survival, and survival alone, it can't produce culture change.

Likewise, excellence might correspond to "neutral world" strategies to change the culture by changing the elite. This strategy is *the correct one* for cultural change, but it ignores the fact that being a Christian in negative world entails substantial risk and incentives. We can have all the Christians in elite spaces we want, and I have seen many. It means nothing if they are discipled into being Christians only personally but never publicly.

Renn's solution to these two competing strategies is to say, "pursue both, and see what God does."

A multifaceted approach is needed for the high risk land of the Judges. Pursuing resiliency at the expense of excellence renders Christians a class permanently subjugated to cultural norms. Pursuing excellence without resiliency exposes us to a highly fragile environment – you could be doing great one day and then canceled the next without anywhere to go. The best approach is a combination of both, attuned to where you are.

For instance, a church in a coastal city might already attract the cultural elite. The church's best strategy would be to devote more time to resilience. The church itself can offer resource city life to resist the "negative world" pressures on marriage, career, and family. Moreover, it can go so far as to encourage its members to support and provide for

each other. Likewise, churches living in more conservative locales should pursue excellence through communal strength. From becoming reliable owners of key communal practices to providing role models in relationships to education. Becoming a pillar in your community makes it costly to cancel and establishes the Church as a serious community pillar.

In any case, the combination of obedience, resilience, and excellence will be the best way forward. Renn's vision is for the Church to not just survive a chaotic environment but benefit from it and emerge as leaders.

While Renn's recommendations aren't new (Kevin DeYoung calls it helpful advice, Miller calls it things he would do already), the insight comes from his framing. What he is advocating is a mindset shift. Excellence, Obedience, and Resilience are all part of one strategy: surviving and transforming a chaotic land. He says, "negative world prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist and be firm." These are the sobering words for our moment. In the land of the Judges, we await the appearance of our king. In the meantime, we must be obedient, excellent, and resilient. We do not know what tomorrow brings, much less how cultures will change. Yet there is great promise that the Church can thrive. "In the world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

STIVEN PETER IS AN M.A. STUDENT AT REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY-NYC. PREVIOUSLY, HE GRADUATED FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO WITH A DOUBLE MAJOR IN ECONOMICS AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES. HE CURRENTLY LIVES IN NYC.

A MIRROR FOR PRINCES FOR OUR TIME

A Review of Michael Wear's
The Spirit of Our Politics

TERENCE SWEENEY

For much of the classical and medieval period a type of writing called "mirrors for princes," was an essential form of political philosophy. These texts were metaphorical mirrors which presented the ethical and political ideal that the ruler was supposed to live up to. Princes, in reading them, were meant to see if they measured up to what the text presented. Was their approach to ruling reflected there or were they themselves a distortion of it? What most mattered was the *kind of person* the ruler was. There are a wide variety of reasons that these mirrors fell out of favor, but there are good reasons to recover them. Reading Michael Wear's *The Spirit of our Politics: Spiritual Formation and the Renovation of Public Life*, I was struck that Wear had managed to write a mirror for princes for our time.

In a democratic republic, government is, as Abraham Lincoln put it, "of the people, by the people, and for the people." The work of democratic self-governance makes us all rulers and thus *the character of all of us matters*. As Wear puts it "we cannot separate out the politics we have… from the kind of people we are." The medieval monk writing a mirror for a prince held that if a prince's moral character matched the principles presented in the text, then the political life of the community would be transformed. Wear holds likewise: "if we were a different kind of people, our politics would be different." Our politics is based in sectarianism, partisan negativity, and showmanship detached from statesmanship. If we want that to change, we're going to need to change.

This might sound a bit like the platitude, "be the change you want to see in the world," but Wear is developing a more comprehensive vision. It is not just that the specific change you might want needs to first be lived out by you (want more recycling, start by recycling). Rather, "the aim of spiritual formation—is not behavior modification. Our principal aim is not what we do but *who we become*." What Wear offers is more of a comprehensive matter, which is why he does not offer policy proposals. He offers the spiritual formation of persons, a kind of virtue theory applied to political life.

This is why I think Wear has written a mirror for princes for our times. These were not generally about specific policy proposals, but about character formation. The genre fell out of use, in part, because modern political thought ceased being a moral matter. Wear is trying to return that sense of politics as a matter of morality and character formation.

This return is no easy matter. A specific challenge to re-moralize our politics is the disappearance of moral knowledge. Quoting Dallas Willard (whom Wear often cites), he writes that "'What characterizes life in so-called Western societies today'" is the absence of moral knowledge which is the kind of knowledge that can serve "*as a rational basis for moral decisions, for policy enactments and for rational critique of established patterns of response to moral issues*." Lacking this form of knowledge means we struggle to engage in the essential political task: a determination of what is good on a communal level. This task is still there but neglected: "the disappearance of moral knowledge has not led to the disappearance of moral questions or the need to make decisions that implicate morality and judgements about what is good and what is not good." Rather, we lack the habits, knowledge, and discursive practices that make such discussion fruitful, and we ignore the importance of using moral means to advance our vision of life.

This problem afflicts Christians in a unique way. First, we too often leave our Christianity outside of our political life, in part because our

secular society claims we cannot bring faith into the public square. But for Wear "citizens must be able to be themselves in politics, to bring their full selves to it." A democratic republic cannot require people to bracket off deeply held convictions. For Christians, this is particularly important because Christianity is a whole-of-life endeavor. "For Christians to be Christian, there must not be any area of life, including politics, that we cordon off from God, thinking God to be too pure or too inept to have anything to offer here." In a democratic republic, people bring their whole selves to public discourse. To require or expect people to leave the central motivating factors in their lives out of those discussions is a profound denial of the practice of citizenship. For Christians to do this denies not only the right practice of citizenship but also the right practices of our faith.

The bigger problem for Christians is not that secularism tries to keep Christianity out, it is that Christians keep Christ out of their politics. We do this because we do not follow His example in our politics. Any mirror of princes needs examples for the reader to imitate. A truly Christian mirror for princes must have Christ as its central example. We are meant in all things to be Christlike. Christian politics must have the *imitatio Christi* at its heart. For Wear, what a Christians wants—or should want—"is to be like Jesus." Being like Jesus is not, and should not be, something that I seek in *parts* of my life. Being

Christlike at home but a jerk at work means that I am *failing to be Christlike*. Likewise, we cannot leave the *imitatio Christi* at home when we enter the public square; instead, we should see politics as a place to live out our being like Jesus.

THE *HOW* AND *WHOM* OF A CHRISTIAN POLITICS

A Christian politics is a matter of how and whom: *how* we comport ourselves and of *whom* we aim to serve. When someone describes *how* we act, they should be able to say, 'like Jesus." This will sometimes lead to political success (advancing our policy proposals) but if it does not then it is still worth doing. Wear calls for a politics of kindness, gentleness, friendship, and love not because it is guaranteed to be successful, but it is guaranteed to be Christlike.

He rightly notes that we should not let society call the tune on what's loving, "our political actions, even those genuinely rooted in love, may not always be received by the public as loving." Opposing abortion, supporting marriage, welcoming poor migrants are actions of love even if it is not thought to be so by the right, left, or center. And yet, this does not absolve us for the harshness of our rhetoric, the duplicity of our tactics, or the moral compromises we make when we choose certain leaders. "Love is gentle, love is kind" (1 Corinthians 13:4) is not Paul writing a Hallmark card; it is demand that we live, feel, and

act in specifically Christlike ways. This definitive teaching wholly and fully applies to our political lives. Alas, we are too rarely living this out.

If the *how* of our politics is acting gently and kindly and living out our "apprenticeship to Jesus—by *learning from Jesus how to live your life as he would lead your life if he were you*", we should not forget the *whom* of politics. The question of our political actions is for *whom* do we perform them? Do we aim to benefit ourselves, our factions, or the rich and powerful?

Our politics too often serves us; it should serve others. We will not act gently or lovingly if we do not realize that we are meant to act on behalf of others or if we see our politics as individualized rather than communalized. As Wear writes, "politics is an area of life explicitly charged with duties of service to others and stewardship—an area of life with significant influence over the well-being of our neighbors, particularly the poor." The *whom* of our politics is the whole community in serving our shared common good. More specifically, Christian politics should serve those whom Bartolome de las Casas calls "the smallest and the most forgotten." In our times, this means the unborn, the migrant, the underpaid worker, the heroin addict.

This reminds us that our politics should also serve those *whom* we hate. Carl Schmitt—a political theorist sadly too popular among Christians—wrote that the essential political distinction is between friends and enemies. There is some truth to this but for Christians the essential political task is loving your enemy. This is no easy task but it is the Christian task precisely because Christ taught it in the Sermon on the Mount. It is uniquely political task because politics breeds opposition but it is with the opposition that we must work not out of animosity but love. Wear quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer "'Because spiritual love does not desire, but rather serves, it loves an enemy as a brother." Christian politics transcends—should transcend—the friend-enemy distinction because "'It originates neither in the brother nor in the enemy but in Christ and his Word.'" This transcending is not imaginary (we still know them as enemies) nor is it surrendering.

This non-surrender that shapes practical realities is exemplified in Martin Luther King. King—who emphasized the necessity of spiritual formation for political life–did not just serve the Black community; he did not even just serve the American community; he served the *racist white community*. He loved his enemies so much that he challenged them to give up their endless injustice. Few of us will act politically quite like King but we can work for the political good of all, including fellow Americans we do not like or who do like us. When we face our enemies in the political sphere, we should love them by telling them the truth lovingly, working with them where we can, opposing them where we must,

while aiming to transform our relationship into friendship. That is the work of politics.

HOW ARE WE GOING TO DO THIS ANYWAY?

Gentleness is viable in our public life. So are joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, self-control, goodness, and love." When I read Michael Wear's list of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, I find myself praying 'Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief." We should though remember what we are aiming for when we aim to be Christlike and to serve those whom Christ served. In aiming for those things, we aim for heaven and, as CS Lewis held, when we aim for heaven, we might get the earth thrown in. For Wear, "if our vision only extends as far as a better politics, an improved society, a flourishing world, we will be aiming too low." But this does not mean he doesn't think we can get a better politics for "it does not take many people acting differently to make a difference in our politics and our political lives." Civic renewal is possible because spiritual renewal is. Aim for the latter and you might get the former.

Wear's proposal for this center on individual practices. Each of us needs to pray more, spend more time in solitude and silence, and listen to different views without *constantly* consuming news. When we encounter different views, we should make room for them in our lives and communities even as we argue against them. In the face of political sectarianism living out service is "the appropriate counteracting discipline." We should not use spiritual formation as a bludgeon against our enemies but as a confessional practice considering our own myriad failures. Wear writes "confession can teach us to take sin seriously enough that we wield accusations of sin with humility and care when it comes to the complicated, contingent realm of politics." Moral politics are not moralizing politics. It aims not for the condemnation of others but for the confession of sin and the shared life of conversion.

Alas I worry that Wear's concluding proposals end up too individualized. He is right to highlight the roles of pastors and parents but what other kind of communal endeavors might we undertake? Certainly this would include endeavors like Wear' Center of Christianity and Public Life. I would contend it also requires refocusing our education around character and citizenship formation. Here I would point to Wake Forest's Program for Leadership and Character or the Villanova Honors Program with its Shaping Initiatives. Beyond this, structural changes need to be made to our political and media incentive system. Yes, to personal formation, but systematic changes need to be made too. This also means policy changes. A throw-away culture malformed us by creating structural problems that stymie our spiritual formation. In this, I anticipate more political failures and weaknesses than successes and strengths. And yet, I am with Wear on this.

If we are going to salvage our political life, we are going to need spiritual formation on personal, communal, educational, and political levels.

CONCLUSION

You look into a mirror to see if this is the way you want to look. When we look into the mirror, do we see what we want to see? If the mirror is the one that Michael Wear presents, the answer is mostly no. For Christians, the mirror is fundamentally Christ who as the image of the Father is the image which we images of God must live up to. Resembling Christ is a grace that gives us a task. It is a task that none of us can completely fulfill in this life and one which we do only because of grace. And yet *it is our task,* and that task is all encompassing. Sin is when I carve out a part of my life as an area where I don't have to imitate Christ. Wear is right to call us to task for treating politics as a domain outside of the *imitatio Christi*. His books are a prophetic summons back from a politics that imitates the world to one that aims in all things to be Christlike. We should be looking into the mirror he offers us in part for the merits of his arguments and recommendations but most importantly because it directs us towards Christ. But we cannot just look, we must enact the vision we see there. And that is the task of a Christian politics.

TERENCE SWEENEY IS A PROFESSOR IN THE HONORS PROGRAM AT VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY.

About Mere Orthodoxy

We are a small group of Christians who since 2005 have been defending word count and nuance on the internet while working out what our faith looks like in public.

Whether it is arts, movies, literature, politics, sexuality, or any other crevice of the human experience, we believe that the Gospel has something to say about it and that "something" really can be good news.

We take our cues from C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton, two of the most thoughtful, perceptive Christians of the twentieth century. One of them wrote Mere Christianity and the other wrote Orthodoxy, and we like those books so much we stapled their names together and took it as our own.

Their thoughtfulness wasn't abstract: it was rooted in the challenges and struggles that England was facing in their time, and their mission was to demonstrate how a classically minded, creedally centered orthodox Christianity was an attractive and persuasive alternative to the ideologies of their day.

And they did their work with words, with essays, poems, and stories.

Here's what we hope you will discover in our writing:

We are scripturally rooted and creedally informed. We know that it's not enough to simply say the Apostle's Creed and that the further we get from it, the more we'll disagree on the particulars of how Christianity should play out in public. But we also think that getting to the Apostle's Creed is a pretty good start for most Christians in our era, so that's where we'll put our baseline.

We're cheerfully contrarian when we have to be. We disagree with each other, and probably with you too (at least on something, right?). We think that's part of what makes life and writing interesting. So we'll make arguments, but hopefully in a way that is generous and kind.

We're eclectic. We could write about anything. Chasing our interests is the only thing that keeps us interesting, and being interesting is the one rule we have. Other publications may have a "niche," and Google loves them for it. Our niche is the world and where our reflections take us in it. And we kind of like it that way (and hope you will too).

We're publicly engaged. We're after the meaning and significance of things, the substance. Which means that we are after matters of public concern. And our hope is that you'll think more carefully, more deeply, and hopefully more Christianly about our world and your place in it after reading us.

THE APOSTLE'S CREED

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
  creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
  who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
  and born of the virgin Mary.
  He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
  was crucified, died, and was buried;
  he descended to hell.
  The third day he rose again from the dead.
  He ascended to heaven
  and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
  From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
  the holy catholic church,
  the communion of saints,
  the forgiveness of sins,
  the resurrection of the body,
  and the life everlasting.

Amen.